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**Back to the Garden: Place, Nostalgia, and Neoagrarian Environmental  
Rhetorics of Community Gardening**

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**Back to the Garden: Place, Nostalgia, and Neoagrarian Environmental Rhetorics of  
Community Gardening**

**by**

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**Dissertation**

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to four people: my maternal grandparents and my parents.

My yiayia, the late *Antigone Kalivas Triantis*, and my papou, *Theodore Triantis*, cultivated their lives in a place unknown.

My mother, *Eleni Triantis Harrison*, and my father, the late *A. Wayne Harrison*, cultivated their lives in a place always known.

I have learned how to grow in the places of my own life from each of them.

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## **Abstract**

# **Back to the Garden: Place, Nostalgia, and Neoagrarian Environmental Rhetorics of Community Gardening**

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Supervisors: Patricia Roberts-Miller and Clay Spinuzzi

This dissertation presents rhetorical scholarship at the intersections of social movement participation and epistemologies of place. The study explores the relationship of rhetoric and group identification by examining the rhetorical dimensions of a site that has rarely been researched in rhetoric as a field: an urban community garden project. Using qualitative data from participant observations and semi-structured interviews, the analysis describes how people in one community conceive of their engagement across a spectrum of civic participation. In doing so, this research questions the complicated and sometimes problematic assumptions that structure people's perceptions of what constitutes political action. It considers, for example, when and how people make connections between their everyday behaviors, such as gardening, and their politics.

Community gardening and other iterations of contemporary local food movements are often criticized for their romantic, nostalgic, and overstated promises to mitigate environmental degradation and perceived deterioration of local communities.

These movements' rhetorics are commonly associated with the iconic and malleable trope of the yeoman farmer, an ideograph that has long been used by stakeholders from across the political spectrum. Do participants in contemporary food sovereignty movements feel persuaded to garden because of agrarian nostalgia? Do they see their participation as part of a broader, collective, potentially political movement, such as environmentalism?

The data presented in this dissertation reveals that some participants in contemporary community garden projects are not motivated by identification with the visual rhetoric of the yeoman farmer or its political associations. Among other motivators, interviewees said that they began gardening during childhood and have continued to garden as adults. In short, for gardeners in this community, agrarian ideologies and political associations are not the primary motivators of their community membership. As a result, a politically ambivalent community coalesces at this community garden site.

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## Introduction: How Does Your Garden Grow? Rhetorical Roots of the Contemporary Community Gardening Movement

“The progressive-farmer ideal is a contradiction in terms.

A stalk of cotton grows. It does not progress.”

—Andrew Nelson Lytle, *I'll Take My Stand*, 1930

“This is one of the most subversive things you can do; grow your own food.”

—Ron Finley, *Urban Fruit*, 2013

These two quotes represent significant tensions in the rhetoric of American agrarianism, a complex and mutable intellectual tradition that traces its roots to the foundation of the United States. When Lytle wrote his words in 1930, he was joining a chorus of white Southern men who vehemently rejected the rapid social developments of their time. Lytle’s essay, “The Hind Tit,” appeared as one in a manifesto by a group of writers affiliated with Vanderbilt University, the Nashville Agrarians. Ostensibly, the authors of *I'll Take My Stand* bemoaned the loss of American agrarianism—a society based on the social values and economic systems they conflated with farming—and the rise of what they called “progressivism,” which they associated with industrialization and the North. Their basic argument was that the right kind of contact with nature—embodied in an independent farmer—enabled the genuine basis for democracy because such a farmer can have intellectual and political independence. While there are many differences

among various imaginings of this kind of farmer, what is shared is that one's relationship to "the land" is both ideological and political.

The white Southern agrarians' politics and ideology were, as many critics have noted, racist, sexist, and classist. Their collection of essays expresses a reactionary stance against the social, political, and economic movements occurring across the country at the time, including the emergence of the New Negro, the New Woman, and the expansion of industrial agriculture. The text causes critics from then and now to recoil. Yet, the image of the independent farmer—the "yeoman farmer" first valorized by Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*—persists as an iconic symbol in contemporary American culture, despite its sordid history.

The rhetorical trope of the yeoman farmer as the ideal American (the type of farmer most often associated with agrarianism) exemplifies a powerful, synecdochic figure in American culture. He—and I do mean *he*—shows up in cultural artifacts as far ranging as the pages of early American literature, such as Hector St. John de Crevecoeur and Thomas Jefferson, to contemporary Super Bowl advertisements for Dodge Ram pickup trucks (CITATION). Even limiting the scope of the yeoman farmer's appearance to the context of agriculture itself, stakeholders as polar as Big Ag proponents—such as Monsanto and Syngenta—and small farm advocates—such as Wendell Berry and Joel Salatin—utilize the trope of the yeoman to represent their investments and ideals. In contemporary urban settings, the idea of the small family farm helps promote and sell "locavorism" to consumers at restaurants and farmers' markets across the country. The ubiquity of this "image" of the yeoman farmer figure—a figure that appears in the



American cultural imaginary as both a visual image and a literary trope—raises a variety of questions, such as why it is so mutable, powerful, and consistently positive. It is also worth considering to what extent the trope of the yeoman farmer and its associated agrarian ideolog(ies) influence people not only to purchase local produce, but to grow it themselves—to try to become “the farmer,” to cultivate a relationship to the land and the environment that is rooted in the complex and vexed American tradition of agrarian stewardship.

When I began this dissertation project, I started with an interest in the trope of the yeoman farmer: there is something about the trope of the farmer that is *persuasive*, and I wanted to understand to whom and why. Urban community gardens, I noticed, are often described with the same agrarian rhetorics that are associated with the yeoman farmer: that is, rhetoric that promises healthier individuals, communities, and local environments through the practice of cultivating the land. So, I wondered: are urban community gardeners motivated by the trope of the yeoman farmer? Do they see themselves as yeoman farmers? Are they inspired or convinced by agrarian ideology, and if so, do their motivations align with some variant of agrarianism, such as neoagrarianism, urban agrarianism, or “ecological agrarianism” (Smith 3)? After all, contemporary agrarianism—often called “neoagrarianism”—echoes some of the Nashville Agrarians’ concerns about the perils of industrial agriculture, but appears to be explicitly rejecting the politics of the Southern Agrarians. Ron Finley—source of the second quote that opens this dissertation—does not call himself an agrarian or a yeoman farmer; instead, he calls himself a “gangsta gardener.” Yet, ironically, his notions about the power of planting

food—of cultivating an independence from industrial food systems, to be specific—build from an idea that is prevalent throughout the agrarian intellectual tradition: individuals’ relationships with the land and food production cultivate their relationships with their communities and broader social systems. In this dissertation, I ask to what extent (neo)agrarian images and ideologies—and the conflicts they bely—are embodied and enacted in people’s participation with community gardens. What, if any, connections do community garden participants make among the images, ideologies, and politics that seem to cluster around the trope of the yeoman farmer, and are they *necessary* connections?

For decades, scholars have more or less agreed that ideological identification plays a vital role in individuals’ decisions to participate in collective political action, especially in direct action campaigns such as the Civil Rights Movement. However, less is understood about collective movements that are tacitly or tangentially political, such as the local food movement. Often associated with progressive politics, so-called “lifestyle movements” blur the line between what is commonly conceived as “the political” and “the personal.”

One of these types of movements, the community gardening movement, provides a site of underexplored, potentially generative complexity for rhetoricians interested in social movements that are not so readily associated with political agenda. As Kimberly Smith argues, “an actor’s ideology shapes her perception of what the problem is (is it poverty, environmental degradation, loss of community?) and what courses of action are possible (legislation, moral reform, community activism?). Thus,” Smith continues, “the

shape and direction of a political or social movement may be determined in part by the ideology the actors bring to the movement” (9). In other words, the political mission of movements can be influenced by actors within it, just as individuals can be drawn to participate in collective action by the mission of the movement. With this in mind, this dissertation explores what it looks like for one community in a lifestyle movement when, as it turns out, its participants are not so eager to associate their everyday practices with their politics as one might expect.

Community gardening as a political practice is not new. The phenomenon has been ongoing in city life across the United States since the turn of the twentieth century, beginning with the School Garden Movement of the 1890s-1910s. War gardens emerged across the national home front in support of the war effort during the first World War and developed in to the Victory Garden campaigns of World War II. Community gardening continued nationwide between and beyond the World Wars, taking shape during the interwar period as the National Urban Garden Campaigns of the 1930s, for example. These programs established community gardens “to help resolve local manifestations of crises that impacted the entire nation” (Lawson 13); namely, the Great Depression. Designed to promote self-sufficiency, “subsistence and work relief gardens” (Lawson 13) responded to local initiatives but were largely directed through top-down leadership from national organizations and federal agencies (Lawson 13).

During the 1970s, gardening movements were renewed in response to national crises such as “inflation, environmental troubles, and urban decline” (Lawson 14). Though features of these gardening efforts reflect values and patterns of practice—such

as self-sufficiency and localized resilience—developed during earlier periods, community gardens of the 1970s emphasized “community empowerment and grassroots activism” (Lawson 14) in new ways. During previous periods of national crises such as the World Wars and Great Depression, garden projects functioned, in part, as expressions of patriotism and propaganda, but since the 1970s, community gardening has often operated in the service of community-building and “supported a more localized camaraderie and morale” (Lawson 8). According to Laura Lawson, the inspiration to garden during that period typically emerged in response to growing public concern for environmental conditions, public health, and personal well-being. For example, “the health consequences of pesticide residues on commercially produced foods” (216) became a concern that spread in the wake of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. Community gardeners during this period, often associated with the so-called “Back to the Land” movement, approached “home gardening as part of a more ecological, self-sufficient lifestyle” (216). This emphasis and appreciation for gardening’s physical and emotional benefits was also coupled with an immersion in “nature and natural processes” (217). Lawson writes that “In the spirit of self-help, some urbanites sought a less wasteful and more socially responsible lifestyle through such activities as gardening, recycling, and composting, and sought to take control of local conditions” (219).

Lawson identifies three interrelated themes that emerge across surges in community garden participation: nature, education, and self-help (8). Urban community gardening has repeatedly been framed as a way “to reintroduce ‘nature’ to the city” (5) and provide urban dwellers “a participatory experience” (5) that puts them in touch with

the soil, plants, and animals. In many cases, “the garden has served as a foil to the city by providing an avenue for the expression of agrarian values and ethics” (5) and gardens often “include culturally significant reminders of agrarian traditions, such as scarecrows, sheds that look like red barns, or crops from gardeners’ countries of origins” (7). While the urban garden serves to remind urbanites of both nature and agrarian traditions, it also acts as a “transitional space” (5) for newcomers to the city, both foreign and native-born (5). Thus, many community gardens develop with an educational bent and as a space to cultivate democratic and civic practices that promote “localized camaraderie and morale” (8) in challenging times.

In short, urban community gardens have long been associated with political agendas and democratic spaces. From wartime morale and propaganda, to federal and state relief programs in the interwar period, to the community-building programs of the 1970s and beyond, community garden rhetorics shift across a range of political and popular rhetorics.

Community garden projects are currently experiencing a renewed growth in popularity, and many scholars consider this resurgence indicative of broader social and environmental justice movements that foreground changing relationships with global food systems. While some contemporary community garden projects state political missions, others do not. Even when the garden community claims to have political goals, it might not necessarily follow that any individual gardener considers their own involvement to be political behavior. This begs the question: If identification with collective movements are not the primary impetus for gardeners to join community

gardens, what motivates them to participate, and what can be said about their participation?

To answer this and other questions, I designed an IRB-approved study that incorporates semi-structured interviews and participant observations of members at Sunshine Community Gardens, a long-established community in Austin, Texas. Surprisingly, my data reveals that making the connection between “the personal” and “the political” is more complicated than the literature on social movement identification would lead us to believe, especially within a movement that appears at least tangentially related to social and political campaigns. For example, although literature suggests that *agrarian* nostalgia motivates participants to join community gardens, my data indicates that participants are motivated by their *personal* nostalgia. Interviewees expressed nostalgia, but it appeared in the form of fond memories of childhood gardening, not as nostalgia for a bygone era in American culture. The gardeners I spoke with also articulated a sense of place and shared community—two themes central to neoagrarian rhetoric and ideology—among the values that sustain their participation. However, their sense of place and community was grounded in their desire to learn and share practical knowledge about gardening in the Central Texas region, not from an identification *as* or, in several cases, *with* anything outside of the Sunshine Gardens community—political, collective, or otherwise.

In fact, interviewees were ambivalent about describing their actions as collective. That is, rather than seeing their gardening as an embodied expression of the collective ambitions of a broader, political community, they struggled to identify the relationship

between their everyday activities as individual gardeners and what they think of as “political.” Even when they did draw connections between their individual gardening (and related lifestyle choices, such as vegetarianism or biking instead of driving, to name a couple examples that are often associated—accurately or not—with people who have politically progressive tendencies), their participation in a community garden, and their political beliefs and values, they qualified those connections and were reluctant to claim that their actions contribute to any substantial or systemic change. In this garden, an “ambivalent community” had coalesced around personal interests and shared knowledge—not a shared political aim.

The findings of my study are covered in three results and analysis chapters. In order to frame the dissertation project, this introductory chapter first reviews a brief history of agrarianism as a complex and vexed—if not fraught—intellectual tradition. The section highlights the mutability of agrarian ideologies and imaginaries to show how agrarianism has been adopted by stakeholders with conflicting interests. It addresses criticisms of agrarianism to demonstrate the potentials and limitations for continued adaptations in twenty-first century contexts. Next, I forecast the rhetorical theory that informs the project and preview the data and analyses presented in the three results chapters that make up the bulk of the dissertation. Finally, in the Methodology section, I describe the research I conducted at a local field site, Sunshine Community Gardens in Austin, Texas, for which I applied a qualitative and mixed-methods approach that incorporates semi-structured interviews of community garden members and analyses of

the garden's handbook and website in order to analyze the ways neoagrarianism is and is not enacted in one contemporary community garden setting.

### **BAD SEED?: AMERICAN AGRARIANISM, FARMER FIGURES, AND THE MYTHOS THAT MIGHT MEAN MARGINALIZATION**

In order to understand the possible ideologies that may be held by active community gardeners today, it is helpful to consider agrarianism's long and complex history as an intellectual tradition in the United States. Starting in the early-twentieth century with the writings of the Nashville Agrarians and extending through the mid-twentieth century, the image of the farmer was presented as a reaction against industrialization, whether associated with conservative *or* progressive politics. Both the conservative agrarianism of the Twelve Southerners and the more progressive neoagrarianism associated with late-twentieth and early twenty-first century writers share a common root, one that extends deeper than just "the farmer." Across the political spectrum, agrarians invoke Thomas Jefferson's ideas about the values and virtues of agriculture as fundamental to "the American way of life." Some, like the Nashville Agrarians, draw from Jefferson's "aristocratic agrarianism"—the gentleman farmer, the planter elite, etc. They believed that the *leisure* afforded to plantation owners via slavery created a citizenry capable of republican governance (Smith 44). Neoagrarians, on the other hand, find their affinity with Jefferson's "democratic agrarianism"—the yeoman,



the small family farm, etc. They contend that both civic virtue and care for the land is cultivated through agricultural *labor*, through actually *working* the land. Though still rooted in a landedness that privileges property ownership and, consequently, whiteness and masculinity, democratic agrarianism offers broader potentials for revisions, openings, and ideally, inclusions of “othered” populations, such as non-whites and women, who are excluded by the aristocratic agrarianism of the Nashville Agrarians.

Democratic agrarians, including those who participated in the so-called “Back-to-the-Land” movement of the 1960s and ‘70s, were arguably more attuned to the social and environmental degradation that results from “absentee ownership” in large-scale industrial agriculture. Writer-farmers like Wendell Berry, Gene Logson and more recently, Barbara Kingsolver take issue with big agribusiness and offer small, family-owned and operated farming as an alternative. The values championed by neoagrarians frequently align with liberal political agenda, including intersections of environmental, food, and social justice campaigns.

Berry, in particular, ushered in an important revision of agrarianism: “ecological agrarianism” (Smith 3). In the wake of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, Berry aligned environmental concerns with a particular type of farming lifestyle—the small-scale, family farm. In his seminal text from 1977, *The Unsettling of America*, Berry claims that industrial agriculture and its practitioners exploit the land and, consequently, the people living in agricultural communities. Small farmers, on the other hand, care for the land and consequently, Berry argues, they care for the people with whom their own lives and livelihoods are intimately connected. These two different types of agriculturalists serve

equally distinct collectives: According to Berry and other neoagrarian authors, industrial agriculture, as a practice, treats the land and its workers as a means to an end: profit. Neoagrarian agriculturalists, on the other hand, regard the practice of farming beyond the bottom line. Neoagrarians view their work as “a cultural contract,” one that “honors and maintains the earth, sustains and perpetuates the community, shelters and benefits the citizens thereof, and respects the commonwealth for what it is: the common wealth” (Telleen 53).

Since Berry’s initial additions and revisions to the long-standing agrarian ideological tradition, neoagrarian ideas have blossomed in popularity, though their influence is not always immediately recognized. The “Go Local” campaign, for example, began as a push for consumers to purchase locally-grown food in an environmentalist effort to reduce their “food mileage” or “carbon footprint.” The movement now espouses more than buying local, organic food; it encourages people to buy goods ranging from hardware to bridal wear from small, locally-owned businesses in their communities. Neoagrarianism remains committed, of course, to agricultural issues, but its influence has had a noticeable ripple effect in other markets. At the same time, neoagrarianism continues to experience its own ideological revisions. Much of the impetus for urban agricultural movements—from the local food movement to the community gardening movement—pivots around concerns for the environment, for local communities, and the global industrial food system’s role in creating and perpetuating perceived issues pertaining to both.

On the one hand, neoagrarianism bears potential as not only an ideological critique of the dehumanizing forces of neoliberalism and the environmental degradation of industrial agriculture, but also because neoagrarian projects—urban gardening projects, especially—offer practices that more people might access and engage in their everyday lives (compared to traditional rural agrarianism). These practices—such as community gardening—could empower individuals to embody and enact their agency, however limited, in spite of the oppressive forces of neoliberal capitalism and despite the fact that they are not land-owners. However, on the other hand, it is imperative that neoagrarian projects critically examine who has access to these practices, who leads and determines the directions of local projects, and what role the projects play in their communities.

There is no dearth of academic and popular critique of neoagrarianism and related movements. Locavores take up Berry’s mantle, but often without knowing the origins and influences of his work (he has even quoted the Nashville Agrarians in several of his essays). Scholars have indicated these oversights can be problematic because if and when people in positions of relative privilege act from these positions of power as leaders in organizing grassroots efforts, they run the risk of erasing and excluding people—especially people of color—whose knowledge and experiences have been obscured from public discourse regarding the political activities and policies that influence and regulate food cultivation, consumption, and access. As Ross Singer points out, “the inherently ideological status of articulations of agrarian myth means they can either be consciously enacted or become frames of material mystification” (347). As a result, neoagrarianism

risks reinscribing exclusions of minorities and working-class people, which could inhibit people from participating in contemporary food movements or, even when they do, they could face erasure, opposition, and continued marginalization if they are underrepresented as vital, agentic members of local food and environmental justice movements.

Other scholars think neoagrarians overstate the efficacy of their solutions and over simplify the complexities of the industrial food system. Melissa Walker, for example, remains suspicious of the neoagrarian promise, as it was articulated by Rodale in the post-War era of anti-industrial agriculture, to “heal our planet, feed the world, and keep us safe” (6). Instead of overemphasizing consumer-driven solutions and suggesting unrealistic demands on people’s time and mobility (such as purchasing produce at local farmers’ markets, many of which are inaccessible to lower-income communities), she argues that food justice advocacy should be focused on “reforms that will make a difference, including policy reform and improved regulations on sectors of the food system ranging from GMOs and CAFOs to subsidies” (18-19). In other words, Walker and others believe that in order for there to be real change that benefits all citizens regardless of their access to local food hubs, that change must occur not just in people’s individual behaviors, but also at the systemic level of official policy.

As discussed above, agrarian rhetorics use powerfully persuasive images that have been recycled through American history. For this reason, Motter & Singer argue that the rhetoric of agrarianism encompasses a “symbolically constituted and historical struggle over the meaning and uses of practice, place, and solidarity” (451). They identify

*practice, place, and solidarity* as the three prevailing topoi that emerge from agrarian rhetorics across historical contexts (440). By agrarian *practice* they mean rhetorics that reference the everyday practice of farming which, in agrarianism, also “suggests how one should or ought to behave” (441). *Place* in agrarian rhetorics means more than the pastoral landscape: “it is the ground to which one is rooted and the community in which one belongs” (44). Building from this agrarian sense of place, Motter and Singer identify agrarian rhetorical *solidarity* as “a political perspective that grows from a place where community is vital.” (441). The agrarian topoi that Motter and Singer describe are useful frameworks for analyzing how participants in contemporary community gardening projects are or are not engaging neoagrarian ideologies and rhetorics in their understanding of their gardening.

Neoagrarian ideals tend to be represented in the form of the yeoman farmer, and this image continues to be deployed by stakeholders from both conventional agribusiness and alternative agrifood forces alike. “The agrarian” imaginary has been applied to wide-ranging fields, becoming what Motter and Singer call a “malleable mythic frame” that “supplies the romantic imagery needed to legitimize industrialized *and* non-industrialized ends” (451). For all the shifting meanings and invocations of agrarianism, the dominant imagery associated with it remains remarkably stable. The image of the yeoman farmer, frequently conceived as a white patriarch who works a modest acreage of his own property, enters the American imagination at the mere mention of the word “farmer.” So, though agrarian representations comprise “a flexible discursive formation connecting public deliberations about food, environment, industrialization, technology, and public

policy” (Motter & Singer 440), it does so through an instantly recognizable image that continues to exclude marginalized publics.

As this brief review demonstrates, there is a lack of consensus about the value and potential of (neo)agrarianism as a critique of contemporary social problems. Ross Singer states that “American agrarianism is a philosophical tradition and malleable discursive frame adopting, defending, revising, and reproducing mythic assumptions about the morality of farming” (345). Singer’s claim that the frame of agrarianism at once defends *and* revises values associated with farmers and farming (such as self-sufficiency, land stewardship, family and community, to name a few examples) indicates the extent to which agrarianism’s tenants remain imprecise, despite the recognizability of agrarian imagery in American culture. Nevertheless, the “agrarian imaginary” is, at least in part, based on the dominant image of the yeoman farmer that dates back to Jefferson, and its influence continues today. As Singer notes, “liberal-modernist versions of agrarianism often co-opt and assimilate this ‘yeoman’ version into a more thoroughly anthropocentric Western frontier myth of the white masculine hero” (345). In other words, the yeoman farmer persists as a culturally significant symbol of fundamental American norms and values—from traditional families to rugged individualism—even as the ideologies most closely associated with it undergo revisions. For these reasons, and much like common perceptions of “the rural,” agrarian imagery has been described by its critics as nostalgic at best, and agrarian ideals are frequently associated with conservative and regressive sociocultural norms and political values—despite its recent applications in seemingly more progressive social movements.

Given what has been noted about agrarianism's complex and often contradictory ideological tradition, one might expect participants in an associated lifestyle movement, such as community garden projects, to reflect two different ideologies, often seen as in opposition to one another. On the one hand, it is reasonable to expect that participants would express values based in the autonomous individualism represented by the yeoman farmer. These types of values are often associated with a tradition of conservative agrarianism. On the other hand, if members at Sunshine Community Gardens follow the tradition of more progressive politics (as represented by Wendell Berry, his peers, and his progeny in the neoagrarian movement, like Michael Pollan and his contemporaries), we would expect to see articulations and associations with collective action, social movement participation, the "personal as political," and ideas about social and environmental justice enacted through community garden participation. Understandably, it appears that these perspectives are in conflict with one another politically.

Instead, the interview data I collected reflects both and neither: it reveals ambivalence.

## **RHETORICAL FRAMEWORKS**

Since human relationships with the land—with place—plays such a fundamental role in agrarian ideology, it is worth considering how place functions rhetorically in identity construction. David Tell argues that "regions" are essentially "geographic areas marked off by their relation to larger cultural mores" (215). As such, they are constructed

through “the building of contingent bridges, the forging of tenuous links, the *articulation* of people, places, institutions, and ideologies that would not otherwise coexist in the same formation” (215). It is the realm of rhetoric that can “tie particular patches of land with the broader configurations of political culture” (215). Yet, I wonder how an ideology such as agrarianism—and the imaginary that coalesces around the agrarian—binds and unties across physical regions in the U.S. Moreover, how do movements in neoagrarianism—like urban farming and community gardening—both tether and untie the “tenuous links” that rhetorically define a region? How does the rhetoric of agrarianism reinstate ideas about regionalism at the same time as it challenges them? As a national imaginary, it has this unique power to do both.

What about when a person relocates to a new place, for example? What happens to identification when an individual crosses a regional boundary? Like Tell, Jenny Rice proposes a way of thinking through regionalism that is not so literal as region has traditionally been conceived. She suggests that “[R]egionalism (whether architectural or rhetorical) is not just about using the soil (or local conditions), but about making people feel at home and reflecting the current conditions of culture in that area. Critical regional rhetorics are thus useful for creating *topoi* that both reflect publics and build publics” (212). Rice identifies *topos* as a fundamentally important element of regionalism and, building from Carolyn Miller, she claims that regionalism “connects material spaces with more abstract or potentially flat data. A *topos* creates a solid meeting site” (203, emphasis in original) where adjacent relationships come into contact with one another.



I mention these themes (place, practice, region, identity, community) here because, throughout the interview data collected for this dissertation, the community garden emerged as a “solid meeting site” where participants build community based on a shared interest (gardening), yet they do so with myriad personal backgrounds and without strong identification to a broader (political) collective.

Perhaps the most surprising result from the interviews collected for this project relates to how participants conceive of their gardening activities in relation to collective movements that share rhetorical features with neoagrarianism. Given the burgeoning visibility of the local food movement and its intersections with “ecological agrarianism” in recent decades, one might expect that gardeners in this community would express an active awareness of and engagement with food and/or environmental justice movements that incorporate agenda related to food systems’ effects on climate change, food access, etc. As active participants in a communal urban gardening project, one could reasonably assume that community members identify with and within the broader contexts of these contemporary, collective movements. Instead, as the interview data discussed in Chapter 1 reveals, gardeners at Sunshine Community Gardens consistently expressed ambivalence regarding their participation in a broader social movement.

Participants in neoagrarian and, by extension, local food movements are frequently assumed (if not accused) to be acting from a place of nostalgia for romantic pastoral or bygone eras in American culture. Closely related to imaginaries about place and identity, nostalgia often appears in critical conversations about neoagrarian rhetorics. Rice admits that critical regionalism has the potential to appeal to “performances of

regionalism” and “particular (re)makings of patterns within specific material sites” (203) and can thus be easily conflated with nostalgia (202). The presumption is that nostalgia often functions as a form of community-building and identification. But, as the data discussed in Chapter 2 reveals, participants in this community garden framed their nostalgia in terms that were surprisingly more personal than collective or political. In other words, the gardeners were not motivated to create a community based on nostalgic notions of bygone eras in public memory and national identity; they were instead motivated to garden because they were nostalgic for their own memories and intimate communities, most often for fond memories of gardening with their immediate families during childhood.

If we consider ideas of regionalism in regard to community gardening, it would seem obvious that people speak about gardening in different regions differently, most evidently because of the geographical and ecological distinctions that separate regions where people garden. Not surprisingly, many participants did mention other regions where they had grown food before coming to Austin and joining Sunshine, often comparing those regions with gardening in Texas. Indeed, many participants cited their need and desire to learn from experienced gardeners about organic gardening in Central Texas as one of the primary motivating factors in their participation at Sunshine Community Gardens. The focus of Chapter 3 explores applications of critical regional rhetorics and place-based learning to what participants had to say about sharing gardening practices with other members in this urban garden, especially in regard to how

knowledge-sharing and learning in the garden contributes to the development and maintenance of this community.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To better understand the degree to which agrarian ideological legacies manifest in the context of current community garden projects, I developed a study that examines the movement in one local community. The study includes qualitative fieldwork in the form of semi-structured interviews and participant observations. The qualitative approach to the project enables both the breadth and depth needed to more-fully uncover the extent to which community gardeners engage agrarian ideas and rhetorics when they describe their participation in the garden or represent their garden to the public. As was previewed above and will be detailed in the following three chapters, what the data revealed was often unexpected given scholarly and popular conceptions of American agrarianism.

### **Procedures**

To explore community gardeners' motivations and the possible influence American agrarianism and the trope of the yeoman farmer, I designed and implemented an IRB-approved study of participants at Sunshine Community Gardens, located in North Central Austin. First, I conducted participant observations at the garden, which is a public space. I recorded my observations in the form of detailed field notes. Next, I conducted semi-structured interviews of community gardeners who volunteered to be interviewed. Semi-structured interview questions focused on the themes of community engagement,

environmental activism, and ideas about farmers and gardeners in American culture, and are included in the Appendix.

I collected semi-structured interview data from October 2016 through December 2016. Official participant observations were collected from the point of IRB approval (October 2016) through April 2018. Informal fieldnotes have been collected since I first visited the site with friends and then-members of the garden community in 2014, and more consistently since I joined the community in November 2015. Informal fieldnotes were ongoing until May 2018. Data coding occurred from January 2017-May 2017. Data analysis occurred from June 2017 to May 2018.

## Location

The study presented in this dissertation was conducted in Austin, Texas, a major metropolitan area in Central Texas and home to approximately 950,000 people in the city limits (2 million in the metro area). For nearly two decades, Austin has experienced remarkable growth: approximately 44.9 percent since 2000 (wallethub.com), making Austin the fastest growing “large city” (a category including cities with populations exceeding 300,000) in the United States. The city’s economy is based in government administration (Austin is the capital of Texas), higher education (Austin is home to the University of Texas), tech industry (Austin has been nicknamed “Silicon Hills”), and tourism (Austin is the self-proclaimed “Live Music Capital of the World”).

The field site, Sunshine Community Gardens, is located on the campus of the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI). The approximately 200 individually-maintained garden plots, as well as the shared and collectively maintained space, occupies approximately 3.5 acres of the publicly-funded campus and pays rent (collected in the form of membership dues) to the TSBVI. The garden includes an accessibility garden for students at the school, and garden members contribute service hours (both to the community organization and to projects specifically pertinent to TSBVI) in proportion to the size of each member's individual garden plot.

Most interviews occurred at Sunshine Community Gardens; interviews conducted elsewhere were typically arranged at the request of the interviewee and occurred at public locations off-site agreed upon by the interviewees and the interviewer, such as at local coffee shops in Austin, the interviewee's place of work, and the campus of UT Austin.

## Measures

Interview questions were designed specifically for this project. Observation data were recorded in the form of detailed field notes. I interviewed 22 participants in the form of semi-structured interviews. Most interviews lasted between 20 minutes to 45 minutes, with exceptions.

## Participants

I interviewed 22 active participants at Sunshine Community Gardens, including eight members with leadership titles and fourteen members without officially-elected leadership positions. All administrative activity at the organization is volunteer-operated, and all due-paying members of the organization can vote for the volunteers willing to serve in officially-sanctioned administrative positions during annually-held elections each spring (though not all positions are elected each cycle as some serve multi-year terms).

The only criteria for inclusions/exclusions for this study's participants were activity as a garden member, volunteer, and/or administrator at Sunshine Community Gardens. I contacted participants through my personal contacts as a due-paying member of the organization. An announcement was made at two garden meetings. I was also featured (as a call for voluntary participants) in one issue of Sunshine's weekly newsletter, the "Weekly Weeder." Participants signed informed consent forms.

Of the eight elected leaders I interviewed, among them included the then-President, Secretary, Plot Assignment Coordinator, one Director, and several other types of Coordinator positions. Of the fourteen participants I interviewed, at least three were very active in the community regardless of officially elected leadership status; even among the elected leaders, several such participants take on multiple "unofficial" leadership roles within the community. For example, one participant served in an official capacity as a Zone Coordinator (which involves communicating with members whose plots are located in one of several "zones" regarding plot maintenance, membership status, dues, etc.), but also coordinated the garden's Chicken Coop Co-op, the annual

Holiday Potluck event, and several voluntary Work Days (designed to help members meet their Service Hours requirements). This is to say that in a volunteer-operated organization such as Sunshine Community Gardens, “leadership” manifests in forms both “official” and “unofficial.” Several other participants did not have official roles, but were active in the community as volunteers for activities like the Garderners’ Night Out social events, American Community Garden Association (ACGA) conference attendance, workshops and “how-to’s” in the community, etc.

Four of the 22 interviewees are not directly quoted in the dissertation, though their interviews contribute to the overall impressions and analyses detailed in the results chapters.

Each of the 22 interviewees are characterized in a table included in the Appendices.

## **Chapter 1: Community Gardening as Local Food Movement Participation**

Ross Singer argues that Scott Hamilton Kennedy's film, *The Garden*, "implies that community gardens may foster what might be called *strong environmental subjectivities* in which experiencing the threatened integrity of biological life expands beyond awareness into locally and globally adaptive practices of everyday interconnectedness with place" (346, emphasis in original). This might lead one to surmise that gardeners are aware and articulate in regards to their engagement with nature through the practice of gardening, but does that also mean that they are conscientious about their relationship to environmental concerns—and the advocacy campaigns and political agenda associated with those concerns—through their appreciation of nature enacted and fostered through gardening? Not necessarily.

As discussed in the previous chapter, community gardens—and their historical ties to political and social campaigns—have been an ongoing phenomenon of city life in the United States since the turn of the twentieth century, from the School Garden Movement of the 1890s-1910s to the National Urban Garden Campaigns of the interwar period and Victory Gardens of World War II. The current iteration of the community gardening movement shares features with garden projects and programs from earlier periods, but the contemporary movement tends to most closely resemble the community garden movement phase that began in the 1970s. During that period, many people were motivated to start gardening because of a general trend toward disillusionment with the conditions of modern life, which included such concerns as: environmental conditions,



food safety and human health, independence from industrial and increasingly global food systems, physical and emotional well-being, and appreciation of nature and the outdoors (Lawson 216-217). Communal urban gardening as an activist project blossomed during and since the 1970s, and community garden projects of numerous orientations and varieties continue to develop today. Indeed, signs indicate that the prevalence of community gardens is again on the rise: according to a recent study, “in 2007, the American Community Garden Association estimated that there are 18,000-20,000 community gardens in the United States and Canada,” and there are an estimated “one million American households engaged in community gardening (National Gardening Association, 2009)” (ACGA.org).

Given that community gardens have so often been associated with political agenda, as discussed in the brief history of the community garden movement presented in the introductory chapter, this chapter focuses on the extent to which participants at Sunshine are engaged with the practice of gardening as a form of political engagement (which I mean broadly and could include engagement by means of “protest,” “opting-out,” civic participation, etc.) with particular interest in their associations with environmental movement participation.

## **FRAMING THE GARDEN: POLITICAL ACTION AND COMMUNITY GARDENING**

As discussed in the Introduction chapter of this dissertation, the contemporary community gardening movement shares features with community garden projects from

earlier periods: morale-building among community members; cultural and democratic education for newcomers to the city; self-help and sufficiency. Arguably, however, the current movement most closely resembles the community garden movement that began in the 1970s, alongside other forms of Back-to-the-Land lifestyles that were popularized in opposition to environmental degradation at the time. Community gardens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century “persist as a small but pervasive strategy to improve American urban conditions” (Lawson 11), much as they did throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Not only do community gardens persist as forms of urban improvement and micro-resistance, but the prevalence of community gardens is again on the rise. In 2007, the American Community Garden Association estimated that there are “18,000-20,000 community gardens in the United States and Canada,” and that an estimated “one million American households engaged in community gardening (National Gardening Association, 2009)” (ACGA.org). More recently, small-scale agricultural projects and communities have sprung up in urban settings across the country, from indoor urban and rooftop farms in Brooklyn, to agrihoods in Detroit, to yard-to-table gardens in Los Angeles. Preceding these movements and growing alongside them, community gardens continue to thrive in urban communities as well. And community gardens—as not-for-profit, grassroots projects—are uniquely positioned to develop in response to the specific needs of each local neighborhood where they are rooted. In New Orleans, for example, political gardening projects sprouted in response to the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina in the years since.

What each of these examples share is that they are located in urban settings and that they respond to the needs of each local community. But they differ in the degree to which they are politically engaged. The question of political engagement and awareness of actions as political is the focus of the following pages.

It almost goes without saying that the extent to which any *individual* is aware or associates their own actions as political is, of course, subjective and conditional. Many people do not necessarily associate their everyday behaviors and mundane practices as political choices or civic actions. Instead, people tend to think of “politics” as the stuff of the news, as election campaigns, as televised debates. Their own interjections into the “political system” occur discretely and directly, like when they go to the polls to vote. Beyond voting, their civic contributions might include participation in direct-action campaigns, such as marching in a protest, attending local council meetings, or contacting representatives on legislative issues that bare significance to them.

Political scientists, Carpini and Keeter, argue that “political knowledge” constitutes the information people have about politics. They define *politics* as “the authoritative allocation of goods, services, and values” (Carpini & Keeter 12). This definition of politics “does not close off discussion about what constitutes politically relevant information” and acknowledges that “Certain kinds of information regarding popular culture are relevant to the authoritative allocation of values” and so constitute a form of political knowledge (Carpini & Keeter 12). For this reason, they conceive of political knowledge as “situational, relative, and collective” (Carpini & Keeter 12); in other words, they advocate a constructivist approach to an analysis of what people know

(or do not know, as the case may be) about politics and civic engagement in the United States.

Carpini and Keeter advocate for a “thicker” understanding of citizenship than political information alone, but they argue that in order for citizens to participate in ways that are “personally and collectively constructive” (5), citizens must have access to the fundamental resource of political information. The authors point out that, for a democratically engaged polis, social conditions must permit citizens to “be able to reason, be committed to such fundamental democratic principles as freedom of speech and assembly, share a sense of community, and be willing and able to participate” (5). While the degree of informed engagement that Carpini and Keeter describe may be ideal in most cases—especially in regard to the forms of civic engagement and direct political participation described above—it remains true that political participation is not always intentional on the part of actors in a social movement—especially the forms of social movements, ie: lifestyle movements, that are the concern of this dissertation.

As the data in this study demonstrate, not all social action is intentionally political on the part of individual actors (for better or for worse), yet their behaviors may still be associated with social and political movements. In other words, there exist forms of political participation that can be *understood* or *implied* as political without being directly stated as such. In short, some political participation is *tacitly political*.

One way to consider tacit political action is through the situatedness of movement participation. After all, whether or not an individual believes they are actively engaging in collective political protest, their actions are grounded in the particular places where

they act. Rhetoricians Endres and Senda-Cook argue that social movements use *place* in protest, which shifts attention from “the actions of protesters through their words or use of bodies” to “how embodied rhetorics of protest are always situated in particular places” (258). They argue that an examination of place in protest “allows us to understand how social movements use both place-based arguments and place-as-rhetoric” (258). The authors focus on how *direct-action* protest functions in the rhetorical construction of social movements. For example, the student-led sit-ins that started in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960 used Woolworth’s dime store as the place of their demonstration because the location conveyed—in a rhetorically situated manner—their protest against institutional segregation in the South. As this example highlights, protest demonstrations can temporarily reconstruct the meaning of places, and thus, the strategic manipulation of place in protest functions as a crucial “tactical act of resistance” (251).

Yet, as mentioned above, not all social movements use direct-action as their primary tactic.<sup>1</sup> In *Urban Fruit*, for example, Ron Finley acts as a guerilla gardener in his neighborhood in Los Angeles. Finley plants gardens in unoccupied public green spaces, including spaces as seemingly innocuous, commonplace, and small as sidewalk medians. In doing so, Finley temporarily changes place in an act of protest against food deserts in Los Angeles; and, it is worth noting, he does so independently of any specific organization or movement affiliation.

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<sup>1</sup> Contemporary forms of environmental protest and the urban agriculture movement, for example, use social media platforms to promote facets of their movements, ranging from fundraising, to awareness raising, to showing the everyday practices that constitute the movement, including community gardening. For this reason, it is worth considering how place functions in social movements outside the realm of direct action.

In regard to the complex dynamics between individual actors and collective movements, Carpini and Keeter contend that “It is *because* the public good emerges out of the often unstable combination of individual, group, and collective interests that information is critical” (5). They believe that, in order for individual and collective interests to be recognized, citizens must make fully-informed choices about their civic behavior. “Civic knowledge provides the raw material that allows citizens to use their virtues, skills and passions in a way that is connected meaningfully to the empirical world” (5). Again, I do not disagree in regard to certain kinds of political action, such as voting, but not all political action is necessarily conceived as such, nor does it need to be by each individual person in order for their actions to make substantial—if perhaps immeasurable—contributions to collective movements.

In a study of garden projects in post-Katrina New Orleans, for example, Kato et al. found that the extent to which garden projects in post-Katrina New Orleans “can and should be labelled ‘political’ varies according to the project in question, and even according to the frame of analysis and the particular point in time during which the project is considered” (1834). Because the scope of any social movement changes with the cause as it develops over time and in response to local contexts, there are many types of effective social movement frames.

Framing is an essential component of garnering attention, support, and active participation for any social movement. “Framing,” according to Benford & Snow, is an “active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction” (“Framing” 614). Framing is a dynamic, evolving challenge for social

movement organizers (614), and some frames have broader resonance than others. The scope of social movement frames can function “as a kind of master algorithm that colors and constraints the orientations and activities of other movements” (618). Collective action frames are constructed through a process Benford & Snow term “core framing tasks,” which includes diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing.<sup>2</sup>

Considering community gardening projects, Kato et al. use diagnostic and prognostic framing to differentiate varying degrees of “political gardening,” by which they mean “projects which situate food production within a broader political framework” (1836). In looking at several such gardening projects in New Orleans, the authors found that local challenges and opportunities “determine the trajectories of urban gardening projects,” (1846) and that as a result, the political engagement of each gardening project varies from community to community and changes over time for each local gardening project. This indicates that while political engagement may (or may not) play a role in a community’s initiation of a gardening project, the longevity of the project’s political success is not necessarily tethered to its mission. Successful political gardening projects, as it turns out, “may not depend on gardening activities or their underlying ideologies *per se*, but on the broader social and political climate of the particular city and neighborhood in which the projects are situated” (1846-1847).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, their case study identifies

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<sup>2</sup> Diagnostic framing constitutes the “identification of a problem and the attribution of blame or causality” (Snow and Benford, 2000); prognostic framing functions to “suggest solutions to the problem but also to identify strategies, tactics, and targets” (Snow and Benford, 201).

<sup>3</sup> Kato et al. also found that “[place] can become a repository for identity and a source of collective action” for individuals experiencing loss (1847). The data discussed in Chapter One of this dissertation found that,

how the political orientation of gardens can be described on a continuum, and that “urban gardens may take on political characteristics whether intentionally or unintentionally” (1846).

The authors characterize gardening projects’ political frames using three typologies that are based on the organizations’ mission statements and their practices. The gardens that invoke social issues using diagnostic framing in their mission statement or community-oriented activities are categorized as “explicitly political,” while ones that do not make overtly political statements are categorized as “implicitly political” (1836). They also characterize gardens as either explicitly or implicitly political based on the organizations’ prognostic framing, which can be “broad” or “narrow” in scope. The gardens that articulate “concerns about specific social issues such as food access, environmental sustainability and local food production” (1837) were determined to be narrow in scope, while those that situate their practices as “a catalyst for harnessing political forces to confront and change failing social and political institutions” (1837) were considered broad in their scope.

Kato et al. consider gardens that view their practice as “a symbolic solution with indirect effects on social changes, such as raising awareness about local food and offering practical guidance for novice gardeners” to be *implicitly political* in their prognostic framing. They use the term “implicitly political” instead of “apolitical” because, based on their qualitative field research, “even these projects expressed hopes that gardening

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to the extent that a sense of nostalgic loss motivates gardeners, also demonstrates how individuals recreate a sense of identity in new settings through their gardening practices.



would produce some social benefits, even if they did not articulate the issues that needed to be resolved” (1837). In other words, the community gardening organizations that Kato et al. examined demonstrate tacitly political associations between local organizations on the ground and broader sociopolitical movements.

In the case of Sunshine Community Gardens, the organization articulates a notably different “mission” from the types of garden projects that Kato et al. describe. As the discussion of SCG’s handbook that follows will show, the organization’s written materials—which are distributed to each member upon joining the community—maintain a degree of distance from political discourse that: 1.) distances the organization from direct engagement with politically-inflected rhetorics, and 2.) may explain one factor that contributes to its individual members’ ambivalence in associating their gardening activities as a form of political engagement. In other words, the handbook—as the introductory literature for members of the community—sets the tone for new (and continuing) members of the community as one an organization that is *apolitical* in its framing.

In fact, as an organization, Sunshine typifies a community gardening project that can accurately be described as “apolitical” in its framing for the same reasons Kato et al. call similar gardens “implicitly political”: that is, Sunshine Gardens *as an organization* does not frame its mission statement or its actions in terms of a political purpose, diagnostically or prognostically. While the term “apolitical” may have several valences, a perfunctory Google search of the word defines it as an adjective to describe something “not interested or involved in politics.” So, while some may use the term to describe

political antipathy—that is, a voluntary or involuntary dislike of politics or political association—my meaning (which is shared with Kato, et al.) emphasizes connotations of the term more closely related to “apathy” than “antipathy.” Additionally, it is worth restating that while some of the organizations *individual members* did make statements that imply political diagnosis and prognosis of social and environmental problems, the organization as a whole does not. This likely contributes to the ambivalent engagement with social movement participation on the part of the organization’s members (which will be discussed in more depth in the data analysis section of this chapter).

#### **FRAMING SUNSHINE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE (A)POLITICAL RHETORICS SUNSHINE COMMUNITY GARDENS’ MEMBER HANDBOOK**

Despite Sunshine’s apolitical framing as an organization, the project exemplifies a community garden that engages the “democratic and civic practices” that Laura Lawson describes. The garden has existed as an organization (albeit at three different locations and under two different names) since the early 1970s, and since 2009 it has been the main project of the Community Garden Initiative of Central Texas, a 501(c) (3) non-profit organization. While there is no readily evident mission *statement*—at least not one that is clearly recognizable as an overtly or explicitly political statement of purpose or intent—on SCG’s website *or* handbook, a closer look at the handbook reveals the ways this community garden engages in the “democratic and civic practices” that Lawson describes.

According to the most recent adaptation of the garden's handbook, members of Sunshine elect the board of directors, including a president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, and three directors. The physical space—which includes approximately 200 individually maintained plots—is subdivided into ten zones, “each with a zone coordinator” (SCG Handbook 5), who volunteers to orchestrate the collective maintenance of the zone and monitor individual plot members' compliance with Sunshine's policies. All new members are directed to read the handbook, which welcomes and briefly orients them to community gardening at Sunshine. Excerpted here, the handbook explains the “collaborative” nature of community gardens in general and at Sunshine:

Welcome, new members! We hope that you enjoy gardening at Sunshine Community Garden (SCG) and that you become involved with our gardening community as well as with your new garden plot. This handbook was developed principally for our new members but may provide all of us with information or reminders about how our garden operates. SCG is a community garden that practices organic methods. Community gardens are collaborative projects created by members of the community who share both the maintenance and rewards of the garden. With over 200 garden plots, SCG is one of the largest community gardens in the nation. Since we are a community, we have developed ways of operating designed to ensure that all members enjoy a pleasant gardening experience. [...] SCG is a

volunteer organization, and its success hinges on the participation of all members. (SCG Handbook, 3-4)

This orientation highlights the gardening *practices* that are valued by the organization and emphasizes the participatory nature of the *community*. It states that gardeners at Sunshine use “organic methods” and are expected to contribute to the collaborative spirit of the project in both the garden’s “maintenance” and “rewards.” It claims that the organization’s methods of operation are intended to enable individual members to enjoy gardening in the community setting.

SCG is (co-)located on property owned by the state of Texas: the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI). In the handbook, a short section describes the garden’s relationship with TSBVI using appreciative, if not indebted, rhetoric that emphasizes the benefits to both communities. It explains that SCG members “are grateful to TSBVI for allowing us to use this property, and we continue to make every effort to nurture a positive, mutually beneficial relationship with TSBVI” (SCG Handbook 5). The handbook states that members have devoted hours of service to TSBVI and continue to help the school in a range of garden-related activities, such as: building and maintaining an accessible raised-bed garden, teaching garden-related topics to students at the school, helping with the school’s fall plant sale, and maintaining a small herb and flower garden near the public bus stop on Sunshine Drive as well as the garden’s perimeter (SCG Handbook 5).

Though the description of Sunshine’s relationship with TSBVI does not make explicitly political statements, these descriptions are not without political contexts. Since Sunshine effectively leases the land—prime real estate in Central Austin—from a government-funded institution, the potential for displacement remains ever-present in the background. Indeed, several members in leadership positions or longtime community members mentioned to me that there is always reason for concern that during the next Texas legislative session, we might lose access to the space. This anxiety is heightened in anticipation of and during each legislature, but the garden organizers are always concerned with demonstrating the community’s value through its engagement with TSBVI and other members of the Austin community. In other words, while the garden does not have an outwardly political mission statement, it does implicitly advocate for its legitimacy to politically-oriented audiences and potential stakeholders.<sup>4</sup>

So, in other words, Sunshine does not have an explicitly political mission statement, but it does have to prove its “worth” through tacitly political actions and descriptions of mission-like activities. The rhetorical diagnostic and prognostic framing of the garden’s purpose is apolitical, while some of its community-oriented activities are motivated with political audiences and stakeholders in mind.

While Sunshine as an organization appears apolitical in its rhetorical framing, at the same time some of its participating members make their own diagnostic and

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<sup>4</sup> Other ways SCG establishes its value to the broader Austin community include its efforts at charitable work, providing space for community members beyond the gardeners, and educational opportunities. These include the Micah 6 Plot, which is maintained by volunteer members and donates fresh produce to a local food bank (the Micah 6 Food Pantry); the Accessible Garden; occasional Educational Sessions and Projects; the annual Plant Sales; and its status as a Certified Wildlife Habitat.

prognostic *evaluations* of environmental and social conditions and, to limited degrees, draw associations between those assessments and their motivations to work in the garden and as a member of the community. For these reasons, the more accurate way to describe Sunshine Community Gardens' *individual members'* political orientation is through the concept of ambivalence. In other words, Sunshine emerges as an ambivalent community. As in Kato et al.'s case study, the extent to which members at Sunshine are politically engaged exists across a spectrum. In some ways, gardeners identify their actions and motivations as political, in other cases, not so much. Hence, they cultivate another kind of ambivalence at the community garden: a *politically ambivalent community*.

On the one hand, participants at Sunshine recognize that locally sourced and organically grown food is beneficial for themselves and the environment. At the same time, they were generally reluctant to consider their gardening activities as a political act, even if and when they recognized their gardening as indirectly related to sociocultural movements and/or environmental activism. Their ambivalence stems from the popular conception of political acts as the type of civic behaviors Carpini and Keeter describe (voting, contacting representatives, etc.) and is reinforced because of Sunshine's apolitical orientation as an organization. And yet, we can still consider their gardening as a form of social movement participation because not all political behaviors must necessarily be intentionally political on the part of each individual participant. These gardeners exemplify what Nathaniel Rivers calls "deep ambivalence."

As the term implies, "deep ambivalence" is not a superficial, occasional, or circumstantial ambivalence; instead, it is an ambivalence that fundamentally undergirds

peoples' mundane practices. Deep ambivalence guides people's daily behaviors, contours their regular routines, and manifests in their everyday lives. Rivers argues that deep ambivalence "is an ontologically flavored rhetoric predicated upon a kind of being in the world—not so much a position we can actively adopt as an attitude that shapes activity" (437). It might seem counter-intuitive that a fundamental ambivalence guides our daily lives—at least for people who like to believe that their everyday activities are motivated by an acute sense of purpose. And yet, this ambivalence helps us function. "In the oscillation of ambivalence, there is the attitude of equivalence. To feel ambivalent is to be equivalent," (431). In other words, deep ambivalence does not indicate or lead to indecision, inaction, inertia; deep ambivalence guides our daily lives.

Rivers's conception of deep ambivalence does not assign a value judgement on ambivalence. Instead, the term indicates an observation of a common, mundane, lived experience. He argues that "Deep ambivalence is a basic condition of being we must honestly face" (437). When prompted to assess their gardening practices, participants in this study express political ambivalence in regard to their gardening because they recognize those practices as reflections of their values, but they also believe that their gardening activities may not amount to measurable systemic change. By contrast, if one is *not* behaving based on a deeply ambivalent engagement with an activity, they might be described as impassioned, they might be behaving in a way that is out of the ordinary. For example, a person who does not routinely do something, such as participating in a protest, would not be expected to describe their participation as "ambivalent." Yet, they might not sustain their impassioned behavior beyond a brief period of time. Instead, it is

the mundane behavior that allows people to remain ambivalent about their political positionality vis a vis that routine behavior. That is why we see so many participants at Sunshine saying that they are *and* are not participating in a social movement through gardening; on the one hand, they can imagine that their actions are a small part of incremental change, but only to a limited extent and not on a structural or systemic level.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Among the interviewees I spoke with, varying degrees of ambivalence emerged. In total, seven of twenty-two interviewees spoke at length about community gardening and social movement participation (their comments are detailed in this section of the chapter). Each of them expressed some form of ambivalence, particularly in regard to two aspects of their gardening: 1.) the extent to which participants acknowledge community gardening as a political act and identify themselves as participating in a social movement, and 2.) the extent of their agreement with the promise of community gardens to contribute to environmental protection and restoration. Even the two interviewees who recognized their gardening as motivated by environmental conscientiousness were reluctant if not skeptical to say that their actions make an impact.

When I asked WI if she thinks of gardening as a social movement, she expressed an ambivalence in regards to the definition of a social movement, and whether community gardening can be considered a social movement. She said that she had not thought of community gardening, specifically, that way before, but she recognized the



increased popularity of the local food movement. “I don’t know if it’s become a social movement or if it’s just become a way of talking about things now” (9:17-).

She also acknowledged that her perspective in regard to the scale of the urban agriculture movement might be skewed because she gravitates toward friends who also enjoy things like gardening. She explained,

So, I don’t know if it’s a social [movement]. I guess I’m not clear. I can see how, I think it’s definitely become a more popular way of speaking about gardening, and the whole idea of growing vegetables locally. And I think people are—I think certain people are more aware of just not transporting food across the world, and eating in season.

Then, she offered a personal anecdote about her own values, which she shares with her family. “As a family,” she explained, “we think about [food miles] a lot. When I see stuff that’s being grown in Chile in the middle of, um, and I just think ‘do I really need asparagus right now?’” (10:43-10:56).

When I asked WI if she thought there are any shared values among farmers and gardeners, she said, “I would like to think that on a base level.” She mentions that she doesn’t know any full-time farmers, just hobbyists. She thinks farmers and gardeners both have concerns for the soil and its environmental health, but she associates “politics” more closely with farmers than with hobbyists and gardeners. She stated, “politics plays a much bigger role in farming than in gardening, in terms of what’s economically viable” (35:55). It could be that she associates social movements with specifically political

demands and policies, as Carpini and Keeter suggest, and that because politics plays a bigger role in agriculture, it is difficult to make a connection with a personal hobby as a political act.

Another gardener, PH, came a bit closer to associating his personal actions as a gardener to his political identity as a citizen. While explaining my research interests to PH for context, I mentioned Wendell Berry. PH said that he had never read Berry, but he had read all of Michael Pollan. PH told me that he is interested in “local issues: local food, local manufacturing, that sort of thing. Michael Pollan is a big influence over my ideas towards things as far as food goes” (7:41-8:14). He said *Botany of Desire*, even more than *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, has impacted the way he thinks about crops. He appreciates the way Pollan frames “history” in *Botany of Desire*: in Pollan’s view, not only are humans using crops, but the plants utilize humans for their survival, too. I ask PH what is appealing about Pollan’s thesis (11:00), and he answered that he thinks Pollan’s perspective is “a humbling notion.” He continued, “We pat ourselves on the back for being so in control of our environment, right? But there’s another way of looking at it in that our environment is in control of us. [...]” Echoing ideas encapsulated by theorists of environmental epistemologies such as William Cronon and, in rhetoric, Nathaniel Rivers, PH finds Pollan’s emphasis on the natural world’s agency compelling. He felt, for example, that “It’s an interesting way of looking at the world that’s not so human-centric” (11:13-12:08).

PH then explained that he thinks the recognition of the natural world’s influence on humans, and humans inextricable position as part of the natural world, has contributed

to the rise in popularity of environmentally-conscious behaviors, such as conscious consumption.

We're part of our world and we have to understand that. And I think that's a lot of everything that's going on with the local movements and so forth is that everybody's understanding their place in the world and taking control of their place in the world. And understanding what is alienating human beings and what needs to be done to sort of take back the world for ourselves, you know? From corporations and Donald Trump and all that. (13:04-13:42)

This quote also reveals a moment when PH makes a connection between the personal and the political, the individual action and its effect on the collective, particularly the sociopolitical.

Yet surprisingly, when I asked PH about *his own* participation in community gardening as a part of the movement, he expressed deep ambivalence. He stated that he sees his action that way only to a certain degree. Like WI, referred to food miles, as an example, and said, "if I make my own spinach, then I don't have to get my spinach from South America" (14:09-14:14). He added, "I guess I see it as doing a small part, and all the small parts add up to a greater whole. But I don't necessarily, I mean I just like to garden, you know?" (14:18-14:30).

As with other gardeners, PH qualifies his individual contribution and was reluctant to overstate the degree to which his actions make a big difference. And he does not connect his enjoyment of gardening to an acknowledgement of environmental action.

When I asked another gardener, KP, when and how he became interested in gardening, he stated that, beyond his grandfather's hanging tomato plants, he was *not* exposed to gardening as a child. Unlike most of the participants in this study, KP does not attribute his interest in gardening to childhood nostalgia. In this regard, he is an outlier among participants in this study. At first, KP said he was not sure what was the impetus for taking up the hobby. Eventually, though, he realized that he became involved in gardening after meeting his wife. Thus, he is an outlier in another way: he is one of the two gardeners who claim their spouse influenced their decision to join the community garden. Additionally, KP is unlike most gardeners at Sunshine because he described part of his motivation to garden is, indeed, connected to the urban agriculture movement. KP is approximately thirty -years -old, on the younger end of Sunshine members. It is possible that his association (though, as we will see, an ambivalent association) with gardening as part of the broader environmental movement that encompasses urban agriculture and community gardening stems from a generational difference from older gardeners, who tend to conceive of activism as direct action, not lifestyle choices.

KP explained that, after he and his wife moved into a duplex with a backyard about 3-4 years ago, they decided to give backyard gardening a try. Their projects involved mostly container gardening, and they continue to maintain an herb garden out

front. At first, they tried planting in the ground and in raised beds, but their yard floods. After failed attempts at home, they joined the community garden.

After contextualizing their decision to join Sunshine, KP said, “I think we wanted to eat...you know, to be more sustainable in our food choices. We were starting to shop at in.gredients, we [got] the Wheatsville membership, so [gardening] was sorta the next step. We’d gotten chickens and so [we thought] we should start gardening, too, and slowly got more and more into it” (6:04-6:25). Similarly to WI and PH, KP mentioned his conscious choices relating to eating locally-sourced food as part of his everyday environmentalism.

As KP recollected about how he and his wife became gardeners, he turned toward the influence of environmentalism, particularly one environmentalist who he knew personally: his father-in-law. He said that his wife’s late father (who died unexpectedly the previous summer at around 60 -years -old) was “an environmental activist his whole life, so it’s something she grew up around” (8:19). He explained that her father grew up in California, that he actively protested against Big Oil, and “was constantly posting on Facebook” about environmental issues and activism. KP reflected that environmental activism was one of the things that he, his wife, and her father bonded over, and that they frequently talked about sustainable living. Clearly, KP’s late father-in-law influenced his own everyday lifestyle choices.

Eventually, I asked KP, “Do you consider yourself a part, in some way, or your garden activities, a part of the environmental movement or environmentalism?” (11:18-11:26).

KP replied, “Yes and no.” Based on the way our conversation had begun, I was surprised by his ambivalent answer. He continued, “I think it’s a part, but it’s a small part. I want it to have a meaningful impact but, at the same time, we are nowhere near getting even a quarter of our food from the garden. We’d like it to be, but life gets in the way and it becomes like more of a hobby. So that’s why I say yes and no. That’s certainly what started it” (11:30-12:33). Then, he talks a bit more about why he considers gardening only a small part of his environmentalism, explaining that, for example, he’s been driving to his new job everyday while he knows that bicycling or taking public transportation would help reduce his carbon footprint (~12:35-13:30).

RT expressed varying ambivalences when he spoke of his engagement with environmentalism through his gardening and other lifestyle choices. When I ask RT if he thinks of gardening as part of the environmental movement, he responds with an emphatic, “Oh, yeah.” He then explains how the environmental impact the physical presence of the garden has, claiming that plants and grasses are good for water filtering, and that the garden contributes to water quality as a result of that. He believes that, especially since Sunshine is both organic and exists in its location instead of a parking lot, it contributes to the environment more than it detracts from it (40:24).

RT says that all these contributions impact the environment in a positive way, but he qualifies Sunshine’s impact. Departing from the overwhelmingly positive rhetoric of community gardens, RT—like KP—questions the garden’s potential to manifest environmental change on a large scale. “Does it make a big difference overall?” he asks. “You’d have to argue that the quantity of community gardens aren’t enough to tip the

balance. But what I'd also argue is that the way you affect change is on a personal level" (40:25-40:37). Here, RT waffles between identification with a collective movement and his expectations about how change occurs. He believes that in order to "affect status change on a societal level, you can talk yourself blue, but you have to make everyday decisions. And that's why I'm a vegetarian." So, RT dissociates from the collective agency, refocusing the potential for real social change with the individual's actions.

Yet, he sees his efforts in the garden as one aspect of his personal environmentalism. "A community garden fits into that" he says. He lists other ways he sees his lifestyle choices contributing to an everyday environmentalism: "I'm sixty-one, I don't have a driver's license. I get places by bicycle. [...] There are a lot of reasons that you do individual things and in the overall scheme of things, community garden, urban agriculture all tie into that (41:00-41:33).

Then, he again admits the limitations that he recognizes between his own actions and his influence open others towards effecting change. "But, at the same time," he reflects, "I don't think I've converted anyone to being a vegetarian at the garden" (41:48). He surmises that might be because of the time commitment it can take for individuals to affect change and witness the effects of change on the everyday scale.

In other words, RT does not approach environmental change from a systemic perspective; instead, he sees change as accessible from the bottom up. This might account for his ambivalence regarding movement participation, despite his acknowledgement that he is motivated to garden, at least in part, because of environmental concerns.

These four gardeners (WI, PH, KP, RT) demonstrate an awareness of community gardening as connected to a broader, contemporary environmental movement. They make mundane choices—both within the garden and outside it—based on their awareness of environmental issues and actions. And yet, when asked if they identify their gardening activities as environmental activism specifically, each considers their own participation with deep ambivalence.

Even when gardeners expressed somewhat stronger disagreement regarding community gardening as social movement participation and environmental action, their disagreement is qualified or only partial. For example, GR self-identified as a “hippie” and was familiar with Back to the Land rhetorics, but still did not articulate a connection between these lifestyle choices, environmental activism, and political protest. I asked GR if she has “any environmental concerns in [her] gardening? Does that inform your decision to garden at all?” (24:24). Her initial reply implies that perhaps she misunderstood my question. “I don’t have any concerns about the way I grow my garden” she states, and then speaks for a minute about her practice of organic gardening and references members’ discussions about what should or should not be allowed in the garden, especially as it regards its unofficial, informal status as an organic garden.

It became apparent to me that perhaps she misunderstood my question, so I reframed the question more directly: “Do you see yourself in any way as being part of an environmental movement as a participant in a community garden? (25:15).” Again, GR replied in the negative. “No,” she says. “I was a hippie” (25:19).” She does not even consider the label of “hippie” to encompass environmental activism, contrary to popular



opinion and the history of the community garden and Back to the Land movements described at the start of this chapter.

She goes on to describe her life in the corporate world and then before or during the breaks from that how she does certain things that are DIY. She describes the “unpleasant” aspects of her experiences in the corporate world and then, echoing Back to the Land rhetorics of nostalgia for personal pasts, GR describes her gardening practice: “This is a return to my roots. This is trying to get rid of that crap that I had to do to make money” (25:55-26:00). She continues, “Being a gardener, being, you know, a ‘Nature Mother,’ making vinegars, making things in my kitchen, processing food, that’s what I was doing [before]” (26:00-26:22). “This is coming back around to something” (27:20).

Then I mention that this sounds a lot like what’s called the “Back to the Land” movement of the 1970s, to which she agrees. And I explain that I see that as part of an environmental movement, even if it is not as direct as protesting. Then she mentions that she’s done protesting before. And she goes on to describe how Kent State and the Vietnam War made a big impact on her life and the decisions she made or the directions her life took. So, her comments demonstrate a dissociation between environmental activism that is both direct and collective from environmental action that is everyday and personal (like RT’s conception of activism) from gardening in a community garden setting as environmental action of any form.

Another gardener, JW, did not believe that participation in the community garden reflects environmentalism, but did think of her own gardening as an environmental act. When I asked her if she thought environmentalism motivates her to participate in the

community garden, she said, “Not in the community gardening,” but in her gardening more generally. This interviewee, along with her partner, is currently cultivating food in several locations, including at a homestead in an nearby county in Central Texas. She wanted to learn gardening techniques specific to the region from other community garden members who have spent years—decades, even—growing in the harsh Texas climate. This desire to learn from experienced community members (a central theme in the third chapter of this dissertation) was JW’s primary motivation for joining Sunshine. She added that she is a trained environmental engineer, and that she believes her professional experience elevates her knowledge of “the scary side” (28:55) of environmental impacts to an extent that exceeds most people’s awareness.

Knowing the extent of JW’s involvement in the community at Sunshine, I also asked about her perception of environmentalism among other garden members. When I asked, “Have you heard other people talk about gardening or that sort of activity as part of an environmental movement?” she responded, “Not so much for trying to ‘save the environment.’” Her impression was that, for most gardeners at Sunshine, “it’s usually more of a health issue” than a concern for the environment that motivates them to grow their own food. She explained that people she speaks to in the garden are motivated to avoid pesticides, and that to that end, they want to know precisely where their food comes from and exactly how it was grown (31:50-32:23). But she did not think that most gardeners at Sunshine are motivated to join the community because of their environmental politics.

On the other hand, another gardener, SP, said at first that though she could agree community gardening could be considered a part of the environmental movement, she did not consider her own gardening to constitute environmental activism. When I asked, “Do you consider community gardening to be a part of the environmental movement?” she replied, “Um, I could say that. People out [at Sunshine] have a more ‘environmental mindset.’” As examples of this mindset, she mentioned garden members’ transportation practices (such as biking and taking public transportation), and that Sunshine members attempt to be water-wise about how its participants use water in the garden.

When I ask about her own action, though, she disassociates herself from a collective movement. I asked, “Do you consider your involvement in the garden to be part of any kind of social movement?” To which she answered, “Um, I don’t. I think it’s a practice of growing food for myself.[...]” But, as she spoke, she reconsidered. “That one’s a difficult one,” she said. She the waffled about whether she thinks she advocates for the garden, eventually deciding that she considers her volunteer work—encouraging children to learn about food and gardening through educational programming—does constitute advocacy, at least, if not activism.

Her comments point toward a theme that emerged and is reiterated throughout this study: that people at this apolitical gardening project converge in a politically ambivalent community. They are motivated to garden based on individual concerns and values more than their desire to participate in a collective movement. Furthermore, these gardeners do not strongly associate the personal as political; their gardening activities are deeply ambivalent.

## CONCLUSION

Given Sunshine’s hobbyist approach to organizing a community garden, it is not surprising that gardeners I interviewed did not seem to identify as “strong environmental subjectivities,” as Singer suggests. More so than fostering a strong environmental subjectivity through gardening, the interviewees in this study already bring their appreciation of nature—if not also occasionally environmental activism—to their gardening. Much like nostalgia for the people and places of their childhood, their appreciation of nature *motivates* their gardening; they don’t *begin* to appreciate nature because they garden, as Singer’s statement implies. In some cases, gardeners expressed a deeper appreciation for nature through gardening, and this appreciation made them less romantic about working the land for a living or to sustain oneself. Likewise, they appreciate the work that farmers do as a result of their gardening, and view that work less romantically than they would if they did not have personal experience with food cultivation. But the strength of their identification or awareness as participants in “locally and globally adaptive practices of everyday interconnectedness with place” should be qualified. It is not that they are not experiencing that interconnectedness on some (varying) levels; but they do not recognize or characterize their practices as such.

As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, rhetoric surrounding community gardening and other forms of urban agriculture often overstate the potential these activities offer for enacting social and environmental change. One would expect,

then, that community gardeners would echo the overstatement we often see, read, and hear online and in other settings in regards to the power of growing food in urban environments. However, as this chapter shows, many of the gardeners at Sunshine do not in fact reflect the inflated rhetoric of urban agriculture. Instead, their optimism is often moderate, if not skeptical, and always qualified. They tend to believe that the existence of the community garden certainly helps and does not hurt the environment, but they recognize that their environmentally conscious behaviors and decisions—even when they are made in a collective setting, such as the community garden—do not necessarily result in environmental protection or change on a systemic scale.

Also similar to their nostalgia, gardeners at Sunshine tend to regard and talk about their environmentalism on an intimate, individualist scale. In other words, they do not necessarily relate their actions as individuals to a collective movement. Though they sometimes acknowledge the existence of an environmental movement and see urban agriculture, including community gardens, as one part of that movement, they do not necessarily associate their own involvement in the garden as being either motivated by environmentalism or contributing to environmental change on a large scale. In essence, there are far fewer gardeners who claim environmentalism as a primary motivation for participating in community gardens than one might anticipate based on the rhetorics of community gardening and urban agriculture.

But as Rivers points out, there is another way to conceive of environmentalism that accounts for how it can be enacted through deep ambivalence. He explains that “Although spanning the globe, environmentalism is intensely local and personal, and so

emerges movements like environmental justice that address not simply preservation or conservation of ‘wilderness,’ which are seen as preserving it only for a privileged few, but also urban environments where humans live as well” (425). What Rivers points out is that, with a strange environmental rhetoric, we can bring the wilderness into not only our backyards, as Cronon and Pollan do, but also into strange spaces—city alleyways, abandoned buildings, state-owned properties, *front* yards—and place human activity in these strange environmental wildernesses within the realms of environmental activism and collective action, whether they are regarded so by participants or not. The gardeners’ deep ambivalence—that they are and are not participating—indicates their recognition of and honesty about the fact that the prognostics and diagnostics of saving the earth are hard for any single individual to contend with—even while we’re each contending with it because it is the literal air we breathe and food we eat.

Jenny Rice says that “By naming regionalism’s heterotopic quality as a *fold*, therefore, we can distinguish adjacent relations from categories of belonging and membership” (209). In the case of many interviewees, they did not initially identify their membership in the community garden as participation in a social movement; however, it was often the case that, as our conversations progressed, interviewees did either directly identify with a social movement (thus, changing their minds, though often with some qualifiers) or indirectly identify with a social movement (often seeing their participation as “part” of a social movement). This shows that, as Rice demonstrates, community gardens can be considered a “fold” region where adjacent relationships (between

community gardening and environmentalism, for example) are distinguished from “categories of belonging and membership” by practitioners.

For example, Rice argues that “The native grasses movement . . . finds strength in the *fold* of transnational grasslands into a single rhetorical region” (209). Similarly, the confluence of environmentalism and locavorism meet in the fold represented by community gardening movements. That is, community gardens are conceived as (rhetorical) constants that are detached from direct action and apolitical while, at the same time, congruent with the aims of environmental advocacy and locally-sourced eating. (It should be noted, however, that some community gardens *do*, in fact, have explicitly environmental or other stated forms of advocacy in their communities.)

Furthermore, critical regionalism demonstrates how we can reshape regions based on folds that put adjacent realities into contact. “The extended consequence of thinking of regions as *folds* is that regional *folds* themselves become strategies” (210). Similar to Endres and Senda-Cook’s emphasis on the situatedness of place in protest, regional folds are rhetorically effective in garnering movement participation. In the case of community gardens, then, the garden itself is a place of strategic, situated rhetorical interface between people who are not from a region who wish to connect with the region through the land, and, by extension, connect to the local food and environmental movements of that particular place.

While gardeners at Sunshine did reveal community engagement as one of the primary motivating factors in their participation with the organized urban gardening project, they couched their community-building in terms of how it would benefit their

own gardening practices: that is, they want to learn from the shared knowledge of the community, more so than they are motivated to revitalize or construct an activist community (this is the central topic of Chapter 1). As the next chapter will show, several of Sunshine's gardeners described a motivation to participate in educational outreach through their volunteerism at the garden, constituting what Lawson calls "Garden Activists" (230). As Lawson points out, this work requires "an ability to work closely with diverse groups in the physical and social context of urban neighborhoods" (230); indeed several participants mention the diverse learning experience as a benefit of gardening in this setting.

So, if gardeners at Sunshine do not or only reluctantly identify their participation in a community garden as part of a broader collective movement and/or political agenda, and are not exclusively or even primarily motivated to garden in a community setting because of shared political aims, then what does inspire them to take up a hoe? As it turns out, they are motivated by their own ideas about the past and the future: that is, they are motivated by both fond memories of gardening and by their hopes to leave a legacy for future gardeners. However, their nostalgia and their aspirations are not what one might expect, given neoagrarian rhetorics and common conceptions of agrarian ideology. In short, these gardeners are not nostalgic for a bygone era, nor do they advocate small-scale land stewardship as the ideal foundation for American social and political life. These findings are the focus of the following two chapters, beginning with what brings them to the practice of gardening as adults: nostalgia for their own personal pasts.



## Chapter 2: Neoagrarian Nostalgia and the Gardener

Michael Pollan, the author best-known for his books on food systems, such as *The Botany of Desire* (2002) and *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), made his debut with a lesser-known memoir about gardening, *Second Nature* (1991). Pollan opens his reflection on gardening as an intervention between nature and culture in America with a look back at his roots. Childhood, he reflects, “is a process of learning about the various paths that lead out of nature and into culture, and the garden contains many of these” (22). He describes growing up in the Long Island suburbs, where his grandfather cultivated a large garden on an otherwise manicured estate. “At least until I was a teenager,” Pollan narrates, “visits to Grandma and Grandpa’s were always sweet occasions” (15). He continues, “usually I made straight for the break in the hedge that gave onto what was unquestionably my favorite and my grandfather’s proudest part of the garden, indeed the only part of the property I ever heard anybody call a garden: his vegetable garden” (17). As Pollan grows out of childhood and into late-adolescence, tensions inevitably mount between him and his enterprising grandfather. He naively hopes that “if there was one place where an elderly reactionary and an aspiring hippie could find a bit of common ground, it was in the vegetable garden” (39). Though it takes years before he and his grandfather garden together—well into Pollan’s adulthood and close to the end of his grandfather’s 96-year-long life—Pollan acknowledges that “the recollected satisfactions of childhood gardens” (2) fundamentally motivates his desire to garden as an adult. “Much of gardening is a return, an effort at recovering remembered landscapes” (40).

The sentiment reflected in Pollan's statement here is the primary theme explored in this chapter: nostalgia as a motivation for gardening.

Pollan presents his return to the garden as a positive personal force, perhaps even political—he and his grandfather can come together in a garden. It has long been conventional to point out the extent to which “American” conceptions of identity rely on a rhetoric of a return to the garden (Marx; Smith; Hofstadter); there is not, however, agreement that this rhetoric is positive—as discussed in the Introduction chapter, there is substantial scholarship that argues the rhetoric of the garden is closely connected to racist agrarian rhetorics of whiteness and identity. At the very least, rhetorics of community gardens, urban agriculture, and alternative food systems often overstate the potential of these networks to “restore” local environments and communities. What does that criticism—ie: that community gardens and similar lifestyle movements overstate the potential for social change—mean if we are not talking about a mythical garden—either Eden or the American pastoral—but a real and very specific one, a community garden at the corner of Sunshine and 47<sup>th</sup> Street in Austin, Texas?

Most of the participants in this study articulated some form of connection to their personal pasts—specifically their childhoods—as one reason why they garden. This leads me to the central concern of this chapter. As will be argued below, neoagrarian rhetorics—including various forms of urban agriculture—are often conflated with nostalgia for a romanticized, previous era in U.S. history. This potential criticism of the “back to the garden” movement matters because environmentalism as a whole is often

criticized as a predominantly white and middle class, even suburban, political concern—a politics of privilege.

If motivations for participating in community gardens are entangled with profoundly elitist (perhaps even racist) narratives about “a better past,” then the project of community gardening is problematic as a political movement. This chapter asks about the rhetoric of community gardens and its possible relationship to nostalgic neoagrarian rhetorics. It begins with a discussion of the problems of agrarianism and pastoralism before moving to an analysis of interview data and discussion of participants’ motivations: their complicated nostalgia.

## **AGRARIAN NOSTALGIA**

Scholars have pointed to the agrarian myth of the yeoman farmer as an ideology that has continued to shape U.S. cultural and political life since (before) Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Some scholars argue that the fundamental flaws of the agrarian imaginary and ideology continue to perpetuate white supremacy, patriarchy, and hierarchical class structures. Others acknowledge this problematic legacy, but argue that *neoagrarianism* can be recuperated and reconceptualized (Singer “Visualizing;” Fiskio “Unsettling”) (hence, the “neo” in neoagrarianism). As a whole, the disparate camps reflected in scholarship on agrarianism demonstrate the mutability of the agrarian myth that lends pliability—and, as the case may be, ambivalence—to its political applications.

Many scholars believe that agrarianism nurtures a nostalgia for shared collective identity—and, by extension, behavior—that engages an imaginary that recalls the way life was “back in the good old days.” Often, scholars observe, this nostalgia sustains strong ties to a sense of place that is rooted in local (often small, often rural) communities, and, importantly, land ownership. Janet Fiskio points out that “[t]he idea of America as a democracy constituted by independent small farmers has had a particularly powerful hold on the national imagination,” one that is rooted in Jeffersonian agrarianism. She argues that we must reexamine both neoagrarianism (and its bedmate, contemporary ecocriticism) for their “nostalgic relation to place, demanding a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the local and the global” (301) because of the many people relegated to the margins of an agrarianism that tethers land *stewardship* to land *ownership*. Fiskio rightly claims that the entire food system needs to be included in an ethical neograrianism, and that there exists “another set of actors whose presence needs to be made visible. These are the people on the margins: urban gardeners, migrant workers, gleaners, dumpster-divers, transients, squatters, and food sovereignty and food justice activists” (309).

Following the element of agrarian land stewardship that is based in the cultivation of private land, it is reasonable to assume community garden participants would express nostalgia for land ownership. One would not be surprised if gardeners were tapping into the mythic American Dream that promotes the idea that each citizen could and should control the destiny of a piece of the land, however small or not-so-small. However, more often, interviewees emphasized the personal memories associated with the act of

gardening itself, not with nostalgia for a time when more Americans tilled their own bucolic scraps of the American landscape. Gardeners originally from places as far from one another as California to Indiana, from Long Island to the British Isles, expressed a sense of “place” through the physical act of gardening that they associate with *people* from the past and previous communities of which they were once a part. No one, for example, said “I miss rural Californian farms, so I garden,” but a Californian did say that she misses her deceased mother, and, for that reason, she gardens.

This more personal nostalgia—a nostalgia that represents what Svetlana Boym calls “reflective nostalgia”—recasts some of the claims that agrarian-influenced behaviors (such as community gardening) cultivate a nostalgic sense of place. Fiskio points out that, “Cultivation of a sense of place through long-term inhabitation and labor is central to the American georgic” (301). While it is true that “long-term inhabitation and labor” is one fundamental aspect of not only the American georgic, but also American agrarianism, there appear to be other ways that people are engaging with their sense of “place” as they act upon the land. My data suggest that a “sense of place” cultivated through gardening does not depend on the physical place itself, or even on the familiarity and a resultant sense of responsibility with the place itself (recall, if you will, the agrarian rhetorics of “practice, place, and solidarity” discussed in the Introduction chapter), but instead depend upon the associations individuals make with their own pasts through working a garden plot.

## RECASTING NOSTALGIA AND RECREATING REGIONAL RHETORICS IN COMMUNITY GARDENS

As discussed above, nostalgia in agrarian rhetorics persists as both a pervasive theme in agrarian cultural representations and a topic of debate among scholars. Indeed, the movement widely considered the forebearer of the contemporary local food movement has been referred to as the “Back-to-the-Land” movement since its inception in the 1970s. Svetlana Boym claims that during the twentieth century, “Somehow progress didn’t cure nostalgia but exacerbated it. Similarly, globalization encouraged stronger local attachments” (xiv). Perhaps nowhere else is that ambivalence more apparent—in theory and in practice—than with agrarian movements of the twentieth century, from the Nashville Agrarians to the “new agrarianism” of Wendell Berry and his cohort, to its current iteration in local food movements and urban agrarianism.

Politics aside, the word *nostalgia* carries negative connotations. Whether one’s nostalgia manifests as any number of hobbies ranging from antiquing to a preoccupation with model toy trains, the critique of sentimental nostalgia hinges on a lack of engagement with the present. Boym joins such critiques, claiming nostalgia often reflects “an abdication of personal responsibility, a guilt-free homecoming, an ethical and aesthetic failure” (xiv). In many contexts, this rejection of personal responsibility stems from privileged positionalities in relation to the object of nostalgia. In the case of agrarian rhetorics, for example, nostalgic longing for a time when small farmers owned and worked their land in harmony with nature is predicated upon the assumption that one is

privileged to own the land upon which one labors in the first place. At the risk of stating the obvious, this privilege has largely been reserved for white male citizens.

Nostalgia indicates a perception of loss, but the experience of loss is only imagined. Boym describes the ambivalence of nostalgia, claiming that nostalgia is “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy” (xiii, emphasis in original).

Given what has been observed about agrarian rhetorics’ tendency toward nostalgia, it is reasonable to expect that community gardeners might express nostalgia when asked to describe what motivates them to garden. Though community gardeners at Sunshine did not convey nostalgia for political pasts, they did express a particular form of nostalgia that might be classified as personal nostalgia. The distinction—between *political* and *personal* nostalgia—revealed by the data discussed in this chapter points to various manifestations of nostalgia and, especially, to nostalgia’s fundamental ambivalence.

Boym argues that, though in one sense nostalgia is a backward-looking reflection, it is not necessarily destructive. Not all nostalgia is counterproductive to change (hence, its ambivalence). Boym points to this productive potential in nostalgia, arguing that it can lead to empathy as long as we remain detached from an identity—and, I would add, *political* identity—with the nostalgic. She argues that:

Nostalgia is paradoxical in the sense that longing can make us more empathetic toward fellow humans, yet the moment we try to repair longing with belonging,

the apprehension of loss with rediscovery of identity, we often part ways and put an end to mutual understanding. *Algia*—longing—is what we share, yet *nostos*—the return home—is what divides us [...] The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. (xv-xvi)

Nostalgia, it seems, has a fluctuating relationship with both time and place and “feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space” (Boym xiv). But that does not mean nostalgia is merely an engagement with the past and the past alone. Instead, the nostalgic fantasy mythologizes in the past, present, and future; hence, nostalgia is an “ambivalent sentiment” (xiv), one that flattens time and space much in the way that Jenny Rice describes regionalism.

In a special issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Rice argues that *topos* emerges as a fundamentally important element in the creation of regionalism. Building from Carolyn Miller’s work, Rice claims that regionalism “connects material spaces with more abstract or potentially flat data” (203). She explains that a “*topos* creates a solid meeting site” where adjacent relationships come into contact with one another. Similarly, Boym describes reflective nostalgia as a way in which people connect with imagined times and places because “Reflective nostalgia does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones” (xviii). Thus, the regionalism for which Rice advocates and the reflective nostalgia Boym describes both allow people to cultivate ambivalent relationships with time *through* place.



Boym offers a typology for thinking through the ambivalence of nostalgia: restorative and reflective nostalgias. She argues that *restorative nostalgia* “does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition” (xviii). In other words, restorative nostalgia is not aware of itself *as* nostalgia—as a longing to return to an imaginary time and place. It *believes* its own narrative and identifies with it. *Reflective nostalgia*, on the other hand, “dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity.” Instead of seeking to assimilate the recollected past with one’s identity in the present, reflective nostalgia remains open to the imaginariness of the past, which in turn opens itself to imagined futures. In short: “Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt” (xviii).

Furthermore, Boym’s distinction between the backward gazing restorative nostalgia and the more productive reflective nostalgia has political implications. The political memory associated with these two types of nostalgia run parallel with different types of collective memory. That is, restorative nostalgia encourages a “national memory that is based on a single plot of national identity,” whereas reflective nostalgia engages “social memory, which consists of collective frameworks that mark but do not define the individual memory” (xviii). In other words, restorative nostalgia seeks to reaffirm political identifications associated with national memory while reflective nostalgia draws on collective memories that are not fixed. Boym’s typology for nostalgia points at the seeming contradiction inherent in the Back-to-the-Land and contemporary local food

movements: that is, the contradiction in how romanticized notions of an agrarian past contribute to an (imagined) progressive future.

Engagement with reflective nostalgia—the nostalgia that resists political identification—was borne out in my data. Participants were certainly motivated by nostalgia to garden, but they are motivated by personal memory, not by memories associated with any single political identity. In this way, “nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory” (xvi). Furthermore, it is for these reasons that I use the term *personal nostalgia* instead of “memory”: that is, though the political associations these gardeners make with their gardening are ambivalent (as discussed in the previous chapter), they are at least tacitly political and forward-thinking in the ways Boym illuminates; memory, on the other hand, implies a recollection of something fixed in the past; nostalgia—reflective nostalgia, at least—is not static, it implies a sense of movement between past, present, and potential futures.

When individual gardeners who are motivated by a personal nostalgia come together to create and sustain a community garden, they are both embodying a prospective nostalgia and cultivating a new rhetorical region. Rice contends that regions describe relationships among places in response to how people acting in those places create a sense of place not bounded by political borders. Rice describes one of the premises of regionalism with the notion that “region serves as rhetorical interface” (204). She claims that “issues where regionalism is largely generated as a *topos* in the public sphere . . . cut through our lives in material ways, yet they risk becoming an abstraction

unless we find an interface through which to engage them” (204). In this sense, regionalism, like restorative nostalgia, becomes problematic when it remains abstract. Critical regionalism, on the other hand, functions like reflective nostalgia: that is, it anticipates the potential in recognizing a loose identity based outside political boundaries just as reflective nostalgia, applied and embodied, becomes a productive force.

Nostalgia’s ambivalent engagement with time and place leads me to wonder: what does an agrarian nostalgia look like in a contemporary practice? Moreover, does this neoagrarian nostalgia motivate people on the ground (figuratively and literally) to garden? And if so, to what extent do they identify with place, and in what ways? Community gardeners bring their pasts to bear on their practices in the material sites of their present lives: in other words, their engagement with gardening embodies their nostalgia. Through the act of gardening, they recreate a sense of their pasts in the time and place of their present.

One way I expected community garden participants to express their motivation to garden was based in making a *political* connection between their gardening and political action (as discussed in the previous chapter). Interestingly, participants did not always readily identify with the community garden as a site for what Rice is referring to as a “rhetorical interface.” That is, they did not see their garden as politically motivated (at least not as one of their most common reasons for gardening, as their nostalgia is).

Reflective nostalgia contributes to bringing individual gardeners to the shared community space where one might expect they identify with a collective movement. Rice claims that “Through participation in local conversations and movements about food

politics, local economic practices, and place-appropriate land usage, people are able to reaffirm and reclaim place” (204). My project sought to directly substantiate or deny that claim. In the case of Sunshine Community Gardens, people reaffirm and reclaim place outside of identification with political boundaries and based on apolitical motivations—or, at best, ambivalent political motivations (ie: their reflective nostalgia).

Instead of recalling culturally significant pasts, the nostalgic topoi that emerge as motivators in this garden are associated with personal memories of family, childhood, learning about nature, and domestic skills passed down through intimate relationships. These topoi build this community garden’s mission and engagement in ways that are unique to the organization itself. The Sunshine Community Garden website, for example, highlights the garden’s history and service to the community. On their About Us page, the garden is introduced as a long-established organization with ties to the greater Austin community and Central Texas region:

Sunshine Community Gardens has been in existence since 1979 with over 200 plots on about 3 acres of land in north central Austin, Texas. The land is leased from Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI) and they are our generous partners in providing the members of Sunshine with an urban oasis for growing organic food and flowers. ([sunshinecommunitygardens.org](http://sunshinecommunitygardens.org))

The legacy of the garden’s volunteers to their community—a manifestation of both their productive, reflective nostalgia and their embodiment of ambivalent regionalism—is described in more depth in Chapter 3. For now, the following section demonstrates the

ways community gardeners describe their motivation to garden, revealing how their reflective nostalgia and ambivalent regionalism inspires them to take up the hoe.

#### **DATA ANALYSIS: “WE ARE ALL SORT OF LOOKING FOR HOME”: NOSTALGIC RHETORIC IN THE CASE OF SUNSHINE COMMUNITY GARDENS**

In regard to nostalgic and romanticized rhetorics about farming, rural life, “simpler times,” and the likes, wherein gardening could constitute a practice that returns or reconnects participants to these imagined cultural pasts, interviewees’ responses were mixed in the scope of their engagement with gardening as a project in nostalgic recreation. A few did mention concerns about a perceived “loss” of “basic skills.” And several expressed a desire for some degree of “self-sufficiency” as a motivation for their gardening, but none painted *explicitly political* topoi connections using the brushstroke of agrarian nostalgia. In other words, they did not articulate a desire for the recreation of any previous national—or regional—sociopolitical identity based on agrarian ideologies or agricultural lifestyles.

What does appear to motivate participants, however, reveals an unexpected kind of nostalgia: nostalgia for their own personal histories. This type of nostalgia is based in personal experiences and memories. Most interviewees remembered gardening as children, usually with family members. Even when interviewees did not have childhood gardening experience per se, they still identified with childhood experiences either around agricultural communities, other gardeners, or outdoor recreational activities that

contribute to their current engagement in community gardening. Whatever the particularities of each person's past experiences may be, personal nostalgia was expressed by each of the interviewees, and it constitutes a strong factor in their motivation to garden as adults.

Fifteen of the twenty-two participants in this study mentioned growing up with gardening or farming as part of their childhood. They are motivated to garden in their adult lives because of the memories they associate with family members who cultivated the earth. For instance, when I asked one interviewee, BG, how she decided to join the community garden, she responded that her mother passed away in 1998, and she has been gardening ever since. She explained that after her mother died, she wanted to do something that connected her to the memory of her mother. She started gardening, initially, by trying to grow tomatoes at home, but there was not enough space or sunlight. Eventually, she learned that Sunshine Community Gardens is located a “ten-minute drive” from where she lives, making it convenient for her to get to and from her garden plot. Though the need for sufficient space and sunlight for growing are often listed as the first, and most practical, reasons individuals join the community garden, BG's comments reveal a more intimate and personal motivation for gardening: her own memories.

As our conversation progressed, we discussed commonplace ideas about where and how food is produced. I mentioned the common perception or “imaginary” in the U.S. that “food production happens outside of the city” (17:03). BG responded, “So that's why it's so—yeah. There's something very charming and very appealing about that, I think” (17:06-17:13). She continued, explaining that she grew up in an agricultural region

of California, “with the ag reports in the morning” (21:30) airing over the radio. Though her family did not have their own farm, she mentioned that everyone in the area had orchards, cotton, or grapes.

At this point, I became curious if perhaps she harbors any romantic nostalgia for agrarian or pastoral imaginaries. So, I asked: “It sounds like for you, there is connection to an agrarian ideal that does motivate your participation in the garden” (24:58). She replied, “Yeah, I think we are all sort of looking for home” (25:11). Even when I made a direct link between agrarianism and her motivation to garden, she returned to the idea that her gardening is about a personal, individual relationship to agriculture and to a sense of belonging based in a local, lived experience, such as her home community. In other words, she articulated the type of nostalgia Boym refers to as reflective nostalgia.

As mentioned, this participant was one of fifteen in the study who expressed nostalgic memories as one motivation for gardening in their present lives. As I examined their recounting of their nostalgic memories, I found that there are three types of nostalgic memories articulated in the data: *emulation*, *inheritance*, and *self-sufficiency*.

### Gardening as Emulation and Inheritance

Participants are often motivated by memories of one (or a few) particular family member(s). They express a desire to embody a remembered connection with that family member—living or not—through their own gardening. Four of the fifteen interviewees who mentioned childhood as a reason for gardening exemplify this *specific* desire, the

desire to sustain remembered connections with family through gardening practices; in other words, the desire to emulate.

In addition to the trope of emulation, gardening as inheritance emerges as a trope related to memories gardening family. Three people used the gardening as an emulation trope, one used only the inheritance trope, while two used both tropes. In other words, three gardeners see the connection as behavioral, (re)enactment of a shared practice they witnessed with or through a family member (emulation trope). Three understand the connection to family on a deeply inherent level, even to the point of it being “passed down” as if through genetic material (inheritance trope). Two of them describe their gardening as an activity motivated by both “nature” and “nurture” influences (both tropes together).

One participant, GR, exemplifies the emulation of a family member through gardening. She mentions that her father was “a corporate man,” but he always grew tomatoes, whether they were living in West Virginia, Ohio, or Pennsylvania. As an adult, GR also entered the corporate world, but much like her father, she spent leisure time gardening in an attempt to alleviate the stressors of her occupation. She explains that the gardening (and DIY projects) that she does extensively in her retirement continue to provide her a way to “get back to her roots,” roots that developed as she witnessed her father grow tomatoes.

KS also has memories of her father that she emulates with gardening, but in a drastically different context. She says that, growing up, she “was always interested” in gardening. She thinks part of that interest comes from the knowledge that her father was



more than a hobby-gardener: he was a poor subsistence farmer in Illinois. “My dad grew up on a farm,” she says, “and he could grow just about everything.” She says that she “envied that” and figured she could probably do it, too. Though KS grew up in Texas and now lives in the urban heart of Austin, she recreates a connection to her father’s rural agricultural past in her plot at Sunshine. She draws both motivation to garden and confidence in her ability to garden successfully from the lineage she sees with her father’s capable farming. The fact that she “envied” her father’s skills as a grower reveals, indirectly, that she values the practice.

On the other hand, one respondent, PP, described her motivation to garden as a type of inherited trait. When I asked PP why she likes to garden, she responded, “Um, hard to—I guess it’s in my genes.” She explained that her mother was not an extensive gardener, but that she “liked to dig in the dirt” at their suburban home on Long Island. The implication here is that PP believes that, on some level, because her mother had a green thumb, she does, too. In PP’s case, even though she admitted her mother’s gardening was limited, she feels compelled to garden as if it was predestined in her genetic makeup. Granted, PP’s description draws on a cliché in saying something must be “in her genes.” Nevertheless, the trope she engaged is one of inherited, as opposed to emulated, behavior.

MM articulated both metaphorical connections, emulation and inheritance, with a gardening family member. She attributed her motivation to garden as both the desire to emulate as well as an inherited compulsion. When I asked MM when she began gardening, she said she gardened vegetables as a pre-adolescent child with her

grandmother, who lived with her family. She remarked that her gardening as an adult must be an “emulation” of her grandmother, and of her mother, who had a vast knowledge of plant life. Her desire to emulate her family demonstrates the motivation to behave in a way that preserves both practical knowledge and values that the gardener remembers learning from family.

The nostalgia MM articulated for her childhood experiences with family in the garden, however, is not ideologically inflected. If the gardener is indeed nostalgic about her own memories, as is the case for this and the other interviewees in this study, the nostalgia is deeply personal. So deeply personal, in fact, that the interviewee described her connection to gardening even beyond her lived experience with her grandmother and mother. She used an inborn-embodied metaphor: “I think it’s in my blood.” Though describing something as “in one’s blood” is a commonplace cliché, the choice (however deliberate or otherwise) to describe her motivation to garden using a metaphor that engages hereditary connotations certainly reveals a sense of “heritage” in the gardener’s connection to her practice. At the same time, she did not invoke the ideological heritage that is often associated with nostalgia (progressive or regressive) in agrarian rhetorics.

### Gardening as Nostalgic Self-Sufficiency

Self-sufficiency is a concept and a practice often associated with agrarian rhetorics and, more specifically, nostalgia for a time when more people had practical knowledge of how to do things for themselves, from growing food to domestic arts, to

“basic” mechanical problem-solving. Out of the twenty-two gardeners interviewed, half of them did reflect a nostalgia for these types of skills and values, which are often considered threatened or lost in agrarian rhetorics. Even when interviewees described the value they attribute to “self-sufficiency” in both practical and material ways, they still associated that nostalgia not with an ideology or a sociocultural history, but with the more intimate social group of the family. Three of these eleven interviewees stand out as cases that exemplify nostalgia for “self-sufficiency” as it was demonstrated to them through a family member.

When I asked SP how she became interested in gardening, she said that she had been gardening her whole life. She grew up in Pasadena, Texas on about an acre of land, which her father used to cultivate gardens and chickens. She learned how to can food for preservation from her father and, she said, she “had never eaten a store-bought green bean” until she went to college. SP observed that there is a current tendency among younger adults these days to want to learn how to do things on their own. She reflected that, “One of the things you see with folks is, ‘you know, I’ve always wanted to make jam.’ Or, ‘I really liked it when my grandmother did this.’ I had neighbors growing up that pickled, and those were the best pickles” (13:15-13:35).

When I asked, “What do you think is attractive to people about that? Trying to make these things...” she responded, “I think it’s a little bit nostalgia” (13:41). She described do-it-yourself projects as reflections of “A memory of how grandparents, especially amongst our age group, maybe not people who are about ten years ahead of us had this, but I think as we’ve lost...We’re getting so, everything is so technology-based

with us that having a little hobby, whether it be sowing or growing food or just going back to basic skills is very attractive to folks in our age group” (14:05-14:40). On the one hand, she connected nostalgia to her personal memories of her family members while, at the same time, she acknowledged that this tendency reflects a broader, collective, and burgeoning trend in *contemporary* culture. SP’s comments thus demonstrate ambivalent nostalgia in the sense that her motivation to garden is partly nostalgic, but not necessarily nostalgic for a perceived “simpler time” in national or regional culture. Her reflections are ambivalent in their identification with a national sociocultural identity, and more representative of reflective nostalgia in that her ideals engage active participation and embodiment as practice instead of merely restorative nostalgia, which remains abstract and tied to a sense of belonging to a past time and place.

SP’s ambivalent nostalgia also reveals ambivalent associations with food systems. SP spoke about the “threat” of losing basic skills because, as she saw described it, “everything comes in a package” and so more folks in our generation are going to their grandparents (she mentions her parents as an exception to this rule) to learn about these skills. She described her childhood lunch experiences when she had to explain to her peers that you can eat vegetables raw and without ranch dressing. She said she believes that people need a “re-education” about food and where it comes from. Then she mentioned the recession as a reason some people have gone back to basics and that’s “not a Victory Garden, it’s a survival garden” (~16:41) and a way to feed the family that doesn’t involve only packaged, processed, sugary food. She identifies with an agrarian

sense of loss for basic domestic skills (and greater self-sufficiency), but not in relationship to a collective or national identity.

Notably, while SP did express nostalgia for the way things used to be done, she rooted that nostalgia in very personal experiences (not unlike BG's comments discussed above: her emphasis on personal memories). She learned how to grow and preserve food with her father and neighbors, and has continued to view that as a valuable enterprise in her adulthood. At the same time, she acknowledged that there is a trend among younger adults—so called “Millennials”—to learn about how to do things that were once considered “basic skills.” For example, her brother-in-law, who is a successful local brewer who started home brewing because he had a curiosity about how beer is made. SP is pointing here to both her own interests and values, while at the same time acknowledging that she is part of a broader, collective trend among her generation.

One interviewee, MP, discussed her experience growing up in a rural area of post-WWII Great Britain. When I asked her why she gardens, she described her childhood and the skills and values she learned from her father, who was a small farmer. She explained that her father taught her about the value of “healthy eating” and knowing what has gone into the production of one's food. She explained that they were doing organic farming, but that they never used the word “organic” because “there was no need for it” (5:42). Even after she left the English countryside, migrating to places like Saudi Arabia and eventually settling in Texas, she always maintained her own garden.

As she discussed her upbringing, she realized that she grew up with the idea of self-sufficiency, partly out of necessity and partly as a value. “I grew up with the idea,”

she mused, “though I never thought of that before—with this idea of being self-sufficient. I think there was a certain amount of pride in it, too.” Despite the local conditions, which included a short “supply chain” due to isolation and food rationing that continued in the years after the war, she recalled her family’s sense of independence during those trying times: “We could look after ourselves, whatever happened to us.” Her nostalgia for self-sufficiency, then, is rooted in her upbringing, in the skills and values she learned from her father. She does not express nostalgia for a society that functions on fluency with “basic skills;” instead, she described a personal value that makes her feel both pride as well as a connection to the man who raised her in the particular context in which she experienced her childhood.

One interviewee, JM, did express stronger ties to a society that values self-sufficiency and teaches “basic skills” as a reflection of that value. He expressed a nostalgia for the days when people knew not only how to grow, prepare and preserve their own food, but also how to do simple mechanical things. He lamented, for example, the fact that his neighbors had to ask him how to put up a hammock and piece together their Ikea furniture.

Though these two interviewees did draw a connection between nostalgia, self-sufficiency, and values cultivated alongside family members during their childhoods, the direct connection between nostalgia and gardening practices was not the most prevalent way participants framed their interaction between childhood memories and their adult interest in gardening.

## Gardening and Appreciation of Nature, Cultivated during Childhood

Gardening as an appreciation of nature and, by extension, an act of environmental conservation is discussed in more detail in the previous chapter; however, three participants specifically mentioned their appreciation of nature (which contributes to their adulthood gardening practice) as having been a value cultivated during childhood.

When I asked KM if she thinks any values are shared between gardeners and farmers, she said that they typically have “some kind of respect for nature and love of nature.” For her own part, she said she cultivated an appreciation for nature as a child. She reminisced: “I loved looking at the plants and insects,” and explained that this appreciation for the natural world, cultivated in family gardens, even contributed to her decision to become a botanist.

Two of the gardeners I spoke with are lifelong outdoor enthusiasts. For example, PH, who also gardened as a child, says that he has always enjoyed being outdoors and is a lifelong camper. He continues to spend time outdoors—including in the garden—because he finds nature “therapeutic” and enjoys outdoor recreation and exercise.

A couple of gardeners I spoke with did not garden as children, but one of these did cultivate an appreciation for nature during his youth. KP did not garden as a child, but he still attributes some of his interest in gardening as an adult to an appreciation of nature that he developed during childhood. When I asked how he encountered the idea that gardening might be an aspect of sustainable lifestyle choices (17:10-17:23), he couched his answer in experiences and values he learned when he was very young. He described growing up as a Boy Scout and enjoying the outdoors, camping, and the idea of living off

the grid. He said he has long been attracted to the idea of living “in a cabin in the woods with solar panels, living off the land. It was always one of those childhood things” (17:36-17:42). He went on to say that he and his wife have even discussed the idea of having a small plot of land and a tiny house someday. This reveals that nostalgia for childhood experiences in the outdoors can also contribute to a gardener’s adulthood appreciation for and participation in gardening.

## **CONCLUSION**

Gardeners at Sunshine Community Gardens express an ambivalent nostalgia. On the one hand, they are motivated to garden based on a range of memories, from experiences with family members and gardening during their childhood to a sense of loss of the way things used to be, a nostalgia for basic skills and self-sufficiency. In both senses, gardeners are engaging and embodying a form of nostalgia, which is itself ambivalent. Indeed, “Nostalgia tantalizes us with its fundamental ambivalence; it is about the repetition of the unrepeatable, materialization of the immaterial. [...] To unearth the fragments of nostalgia one needs a dual archeology of memory and of place, and a dual history of illusions and of actual practices” (Boym xvii-xviii). In this regard, too, gardening engages memories of both time and place and, in doing so, creates a newly imagined region, one determined by practice motivated through an imagined sense of the past.



Furthermore, as I will detail in the following chapter, Sunshine Community Gardens participants claim that they want to learn from experienced gardeners how to garden in the local region where they live, the northeastern edge of Central Texas's Hill Country. So, though gardeners are often searching for a sense of "home" or a return to an activity they recall fondly from their childhood (one that often also reconnects them with a family member, even if only in memory or in remembering through the act of doing in the present), they are often open and actively seeking ways in which to adopt the practices they might have learned in the past (in another region). In this sense, they are willing to suspend one form of regionalism (adherence to the gardening practices required and often passed down through generations of experience from one particular place) and, in doing so, create another form of regionalism or "topological regionalizing" (203): community gardening as a practice. And their nostalgia becomes a productive one. Their practice of sharing knowledge in the garden thus embodies their "prospective nostalgia." According to Boym, "Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future."

Reflective personal nostalgia (looking back at the gardens of their childhood memories) motivates participants to garden in the present. In what ways does the personal, productive nostalgia individual gardeners embody in the present contribute not only to their motivation to cultivate their own garden plots, but also to how they understand their actions in the context of the community? How do gardeners imagine their impact upon and within the community? Are individual gardeners motivated to engage with the garden community in order to sustain it, and to what extent do gardeners

engage neoagrarian rhetorics of solidarity, if at all? These questions form the basis of the following chapter, wherein gardeners discuss their actions within the community garden, their efforts to teach others about the practice of gardening, and thus, their projection of personal, reflective, productive nostalgia into an imagined future community.

### **Chapter 3: A “Hodgepodge of Ideas:” Sunshine Gardens and Epistemologies of Place**

In “Beyond Agrarianism: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Place,” Charlotte Hogg discusses the promises and pitfalls of agrarianism’s relationship to community-making through celebratory and preservationist appeals to place. In examining the literacy work of women in her rural hometown of Paxton, Nebraska, Hogg advocates for critical pedagogies of place. Her analysis shows how transgenerational social activities “become a space for meaning-making activities that can potentially give rise to sustaining communities,” but have been devalued and ignored as “tools for a critical, public pedagogy toward sustainability” because “dominant discourses on rural identity and education rely heavily on ideologies akin to male agrarianist scholarship originally inspired by Thomas Jefferson” (121). She explains that agrarian literature “reinforce[s] masculinist narratives of rural life and overlook social realities in a community (even while the term ‘community’ is ubiquitous in the scholarship), leading to depictions of rural life that are celebratory and preservationist in nature” (121).

Agrarians discuss community throughout their works. They advocate what they consider to be smaller communities’ relative advantage at preserving both local environmental ecologies, and their potential to sustain rural, agriculturally-based communities’ “agrarian way of life.” As Hogg points out, exactly what constitutes “community” in agrarian texts is often vague, outside of the condition that these communities pivot around farming. As Hogg puts it, “The word ‘community’ is everywhere on the pages of essays arguing for a deep investment in one’s place; yet these

pieces offer little of the daily social lives in a small town and focus more on ecological issues connected to conservation of place” (123).

Other scholars also note the ubiquity of community as a theme in agrarian rhetorics, though some are more forgiving of the vagueness of agrarian depictions of community than others. Motter & Singer, for example, propose “solidarity” as one of three rhetorical themes present in agrarian rhetorics. “Solidarity” seems a serviceable term: it connotes and implies a connection between a way of life (a cultural practice, in this case, agriculture) and (political) ideology. Though agrarians themselves more often refer to “community” than “solidarity,” the term observes the fact that agrarian authors and public figures who write and speak about agrarianism do so in such a way that implies more than the daily facts of life in their communities; in other words, agrarians speak about “community” in such ways that are constitutive of identity.

And yet, agrarians often omit or do not critically engage the social conditions and realities faced by members of rural communities. The particularities of individuals’ social identities that contribute to their relative position of power within communities, locally or more systemically, are glossed over. Furthermore, agrarians do not offer details about the specific activities of day-to-day life that contribute to “what makes and sustains a community” (Hogg 123). Instead, according to Hogg, “Community is usually constructed in abstract ways that promote a rootedness in land and local ecological issues without describing specific details of *social lives* in communities apart from connections among those who work with the land” (123, emphasis mine). This erasure is not without its consequences. Hogg claims that “In these hazy or absent descriptions of community, the

agrarianist ideology persists, implicitly reinforcing the assumption that living off the land is still as pervasive and viable in rural areas as it has always been and that community is sustained through individuals' relationships with the land *instead of with each other*" (123-124, emphasis mine).

Closely related to agrarianism, local food movements—which include community gardens and various other forms of urban agriculture—have been called to task for the “celebratory and preservationist” rhetorical tendencies they draw from agrarian rhetorics. The interview data presented in this dissertation supports Hogg’s notion that community is sustained through relationships with “each other,” not only (or even primarily) through relationships with the land. The interview data discussed in Chapter 2, for example, shows that individual gardeners’ relationships with their families—*relationships* cultivated through the practice of gardening—sustains their practice and participation in the community gardens of their adult lives. The interviews discussed in Chapter 1 reveal the limitations gardeners perceive in relation to their engagement with contemporary, collective environmental movements; this implies that not only do they fail to strongly identify with social movements (despite what might appear to be an easily-identifiable connection to social structures beyond the local), they are also reluctant to claim that their relationships with the land is the primary motivator behind their engagement with the community. In this chapter, the interview data demonstrates how gardeners *sustain* the community through relationships with one another: in short, they socialize with other gardeners about any range of topics, but are particularly motivated to garden in a community setting in order *to learn from and teach each other* about gardening as a

general practice, gardening in the Central Texas region, in the local urban setting of Austin, and/or in the hyper-local setting of Sunshine Community Gardens.

Preservationist rhetorics that pervade agrarianism, while problematic, can potentially be recast under the lens of *critical* place-based rhetorics. As Hogg notes, “the preservation model can be useful, perhaps in part because nostalgia is a force in re-seeing one’s rural place” (128). As Chapter 2 demonstrates, this could also be true in the context of community gardens: at Sunshine, participants appear to be motivated to join the community because of a nostalgic desire to continue a practice they began during childhood. This leads them to invest their time and energies (to varying degrees) in sustaining the community at the garden. Put another way, nostalgia does contribute to the preservation of the community.

As for the celebratory rhetorics of community gardens, “The act of both celebrating and critiquing local place should be an integral component of a critical, public pedagogy that moves toward sustainability” (128). Sunshine members don’t do much of either: that is, they don’t engage in overly celebratory rhetorics about the community, nor are they very critical of its role in the broader Austin community. Overall, they express appreciation for Sunshine’s existence and what it brings to their individual lives, but they typically don’t overextend their celebration of the garden beyond their own experiences within it; in other words, they don’t see the garden community as one that’s sustaining and preserving a way of life in Austin, the region, or beyond (this is similar to their ambivalent perception of social and environmental activism through community garden participation, the subject of Chapter 1). As Gruenewald argues, “unlike critical

pedagogues, not all place-based educators foreground the study of place as political praxis for social transformation” (7).

Of course, it should be noted that the gardeners who share their practical knowledge others in the community probably do not approach that role with the notion that they’re acting as pedagogues, at least not forefront in their minds. The type of “education” that’s happening on the ground at Sunshine is much less formal than what Gruenewald’s talking about; that being said, it still appears true that gardeners at Sunshine are not approaching educational efforts (formal or informal) from the stance that foregrounds “place as a praxis for social transformation,” as evidenced in Chapter 1. Even organizational leaders, such as SP and JM, do not see their participation in educational programming at SCG as didactic activism. (It would be interesting to see, in future studies, if this is different in more activist-leaning gardens; I’d venture to guess that it’d be very different.)

That being said, there’s also value in considering how the everyday social interactions among community members at Sunshine *do* contribute to critical pedagogies of place. As Hogg puts it, “Understanding literacies that illustrate how meaning-making occurs socially within a local culture, then, is a crucial part of a critical pedagogy of place that relies on the interdependence of decolonization and reinhabitation” (130). To that end, she suggests that “everyday literacies” should be recast as “part of public memory”(130) so that “local narratives are not static artifacts for preservation but openings for delving into questions of power and representation” (131). In the context of her study, some rural women “celebrate and romanticize the past,” but their contributions

to their local community are valuable because “it is the act of historicizing that highlights the kind of work not recognized by agrarian literature.” Historicizing thus functions as “a form of reinhabitation, [and] allows these women to affirm and build social relationships in the present as they share their work” (145).

In the community garden, the act of sharing practical garden knowledge invites gardeners to share stories about their lives, many of which have been lived in places far afield from Austin: gardeners from different countries and continents, who have experienced gardening in a wide range of local conditions, share stories about planting, produce and their favorite recipes from around the globe. They compare those experiences with their gardening here in Texas, both learning about the place and one another in the process.

Several members of Sunshine Community Gardens who participated in these interviews said that they want to learn from experienced gardeners how to garden in our particular region (Central Texas). Though gardeners are often searching for a sense of “home” or a return to an activity they recall fondly from their childhood (one that often also reconnects them with a family member, even if only in memory or in remembering through the act of doing in the present), they are often open and actively seeking ways in which to adopt the practices they might’ve learned in the past (in another region). According to Jenny Rice, “appeals to a performance of regionalism are particular (re)makings of patterns within specific material sites” (203). In this sense, gardeners at Sunshine are willing to suspend one form of regionalism (adherence to the gardening practices required and often passed down through generations of experience from one



particular place) and, in doing so, perhaps create another form of regionalism or “topological regionalizing” (203): community gardening as a practice. As Rice points out, “Regions are not so much places but ways of strategically describing relationships among places, as well as the world those doing the descriptions wish to cultivate. Regional appeals perform critical work by cultivating space-based relations that are not grounded in territory” (206). But what about when people are not making appeals, per se?

Informal learning, knowledge sharing, and community building takes place in the community garden. Though educational programs at Sunshine have experienced an inconsistent presence, one consistent form of knowledge exchange and community building remains: the swapping of anecdotal, experience-based knowledge about growing in the local context of Central Texas and Sunshine, in particular. Malea Powell discusses these types of knowledge and community building in her 2012 address to CCCCs.

“Space,” according to Powell, constitutes “a place that has been practiced into being through the acts of storied making, where the past is brought into conscious conversation with the present and where—through those practices of making—a future can be imagined” (388). This is similar to the type of nostalgia that seems to motivate gardeners at Sunshine to participate in the community. Their “productive nostalgia” draws on individual memories, causes them to act in the present, and encourages them to imagine a future (evidenced by their knowledge-sharing in terms of both practice as gardeners as well as in their meaning-making through their memories about the history of the space itself). As Powell puts it, “Spaces, then, are made recursively through specific, material practices rooted in specific land bases, through the cultural practices linked to

that place, and through the accompanying theoretical practices that arise from that place—like imagining community ‘away’ from but related to that space” (388). Indeed, gardeners at Sunshine recollect communities of practice from their personal pasts, and those recollections perpetuate their actions in the community garden of their present.

Powell also offers insights that can work in congruence with Hogg’s advocacy of critical place-based pedagogies. Powell, drawing on Walter D. Mignolo, claims that the project of decolonizing Western epistemology is not meant to deny Western epistemology, but instead to expose it as but one way-of-knowing among many others (392). She advocates “critical orientations to knowledge-making” and emphasizes “recognizing *all* available knowledge-making practices as real options, and representing them as viable and valid in our classrooms and in our scholarship. I’m talking about the visibility and accessibility of those options being our goal” (401, emphasis in original). This is similar to Hogg’s project, which amplifies the voices and highlights the meaning-making processes of rural women in their contributions to their local communities.

At Sunshine Community Gardens, like the women in rural Nebraska, community members themselves may not identify with critical place-based pedagogy as a theory of practice; however, in the sharing of knowledge and telling of stories from the garden, they practice the type of place-based meaning-making Hogg and Powell advocate.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Several themes emerged when gardeners talked about how they seek and share gardening knowledge in the community. Three interviewees (JS, RT, IF) said that they see the garden community as a place where members meet new people and make friends on the basis of their shared hobby and interest in growing food or flowers. Four interviewees (SP, SU, JM, JW) expressed their appreciation for the community garden as a space to learn from one another about the practice of that shared interest, particularly in regard to successful growing techniques for the Central Texas region. Three interviewees believed that the learning opportunities the community provides are especially attractive and important for “new” gardeners (“new” here meaning either new to gardening in Central Texas or new to gardening more generally). Three gardeners mentioned their appreciation for learning about produce from people who are not originally from Texas or, in some cases, the United States. Most closely-related to the types of place-based meaning-making and community-building practices that Hogg and Powell describe, two gardeners said that they value the transfer and sharing of knowledge in the community garden as a means of maintaining and sustaining the community into the future.

#### Community gardening as a social network

Several gardeners mention the social nature of learning in the garden. For example, RT said that when he was a younger gardener, the community garden was the only place outside of his job where he had friends who were much older than himself. Then he

likens it to a place like the bar in the sitcom *Cheers*, where “not *everybody* knows your name, but a lot of folks do and you can talk about gardening and other things.” He compares learning in the garden to both *Star Trek*’s “Borg ways” and to the ancient Romans’ practice of adopting the cultures of the territories they conquered (the “Roman way”). He adds that people start to acquire common knowledge that they share in the garden. As far as socializing, he “it probably depends most on who’s here when you’re here.” He added that if a member volunteers a lot, they tend to develop a broader network within the garden.

RT’s observations are interesting because they conflate socializing with learning; that is, it sounds like a lot of the talking that goes on in the garden is, not surprisingly, about the practice of gardening itself. Though there have been (and continue to be) several social events outside the garden, the primary way people get to know their community in this garden is through sharing and receiving knowledge about the practice. (Other types of gardens might have different dynamics, such as those grounded at a place of worship or with a more explicitly political agenda than Sunshine).

Another gardener, IF, reflects similar beliefs to RT about why participants join the Sunshine community. When I asked IF what she thinks motivates other garden members to grow food in this setting, she replied that, for older gardeners, gardening at Sunshine is “a social thing.” She said that Sunshine is her social network, and that she thinks this is the case for many other members of the community because, she believes, gardeners share similar values. “Basically,” IF said, “this is my social network. And I think it is for a lot of people. This is where I find my friends.” She explained that she thinks the social

aspects of the community work well for many members “because you have something in common.” Of course, gardeners share an interest in the same hobby, but IF also said that she believes they share similar values beyond the practice of gardening. She said that, in her experience, “gardeners, for the most part, self-select. For the same values that we think are important.” When I asked her what she thinks those values are, IF said she thinks gardeners are committed to “Being realistic, responsible, pleasant, kind.” She added that they tend to be, “Concerned about the environment. Sort of smart or at least knowledgeable. Did I say ‘kind?’ Because I think ‘kind’ is important.”

In other words, especially (but not exclusively) among community members of the same generation or similar stages in life, the gardeners at Sunshine build and maintain the community based on not only a shared hobby, but also through a perception of shared values. Gardeners’ perceptions of shared values reflects the type of place-based learning that Hogg observed in members of her rural hometown’s literacy practices and social activities within the local Garden Club. Hogg claims that in that community, “they nourish a kind of reciprocal sponsorship in which town members seem to take on literacies that benefit individuals mutually” (141). Hogg argues this is a type of “mutual identification [...] on microlevels, in which individuals support each other’s common interests through their literacy endeavors” (141). In Sunshine, IF says that retirees (herself included) get very involved in the administration and management of the garden. She observes this aspect of community garden participation as very “appealing” to retired members of the community.

## Community gardening as a place of practice

Four participants (JS, JM/JW, IF, SU) discussed the importance of learning gardening practices and techniques that can contribute to the success of each gardener's efforts. Each of these interviewees emphasized the importance of learning how to garden in the Central Texas region, in particular. For example, JS admitted that his wife motivates much of his decision to garden and to participate in the community, and that his wife has cultivated an extensive knowledge of what it takes to sustain a thriving gardening practice in Texas. Transplants to Austin from cooler, wetter climates with three main growing seasons, JS and his wife maintain a 400-square foot plot in Sunshine Community Gardens and an additional plot in another, smaller community garden located in Hyde Park, a neighborhood in Central Austin that is adjacent to Sunshine. He attributed his wife's knowledge and their shared success, in part, to what they have been able to learn about the practice of gardening in Central Texas from established and experienced gardeners at Sunshine. He said that he believes they would not necessarily be gardening on the scale that they do if it was not for the expertise they cultivated through learning from Sunshine community members who have been gardening in the region for years.

Like JS and his wife, other gardeners said that they were motivated to join the community in the hopes of learning about gardening in the Central Texas region. However, some participants were less enthusiastic about the extent to which they learned how to garden successfully from other members of the community. For example, another couple, JM and JW, both said that they joined the garden with the intention of learning

from experienced garden members. JM reiterated what his partner, JW, said about the desire to join the community garden in order to learn from experienced gardeners in Texas; however, they agreed that, for them, membership in the community garden has not been as valuable for the specific and extensive knowledge he was hoping to access. He said he has not learned as much as he had anticipated about growing food in Central Texas, and he thought this was due, in part, to his perception that most gardeners at Sunshine approach growing food with a different agenda than he and his partner—that is, he and his partner share the goal of becoming almost entirely “self-sufficient” in their food consumption. While “self-sufficiency” and similar values motivate other gardeners to some extent, JM and JW have plans to start a homestead.

In light of this goal, JM and JW wanted to learn as much as they can about how to produce a high yield of crops with limited space and in a relatively harsh climate. He explained that most members at Sunshine “don’t take [gardening] scientifically.” He described most members’ approach to learning about gardening as more “anecdotal” and experienced-based. He explained that he and his partner, in comparison, approach gardening and planning their planting based on more “empirical” knowledge. When I asked JM his reason for keeping detailed records of their gardening and yields, JM explained that they plan to take what they learn at Sunshine and transfer that knowledge and experience to their 15-acre farm in Caldwell county, which is located south/southeast of Travis County, where Austin and Sunshine are situated. (All of this being said, JM also said that he thinks his participation at Sunshine has been valuable in terms of meeting people and making friends, echoing what RT and IF said in the previous section about the

social opportunities the community garden provides its members.)

Interestingly, JM and his wife are not the only members of Sunshine who have had plans to expand their food-growing activities. JS said that he and his wife have considered the possibility of starting a community garden or a small urban farm in the future. JS also mentioned that he knows of several former Sunshine gardeners that, after joining the community and learning how to garden successfully there, went on to establish their own urban agricultural projects. For example, he mentioned that the previous occupant of their plot “[went] on to have his own organic farm.”<sup>5</sup>

JS said he believes that learning in the community garden is a primary motivator for many members. “Some people are in it for the learning,” he explained, and that they are “learning important skills beyond the planting, maintaining, and harvesting of produce.” He described other types of skills-based learning in the garden, such as “Learning about composting, about woodchipping, about soil maintenance, weed prevention.” Many gardeners at Sunshine would not have the resources, tools, or know-how required to do these gardening-related activities if they were gardening in a different setting, such as their own backyards or even smaller community garden projects, for that matter.

Another gardener, IF, reflected JS’s assumption that many members at Sunshine join the community in order to learn about gardening and other skills. When I asked why she thinks others garden, IF responded that people enjoy “gardening knowledge” and that

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<sup>5</sup> Max Elliott, who founded Urban Roots, a farm-based youth leadership organization, in 2007.



the Sunshine community, in particular, offers a wealth of resources about what grows in Texas. She said, “There are people who love to garden because they like gardening knowledge, and this place is a very good way to exchange gardening knowledge.” IF emphasized her impression that gardeners at Sunshine are drawn to the community because they appreciate sharing gardening knowledge that is specific to the region. She said that they exchange “information about what grows here, what doesn’t grow here.” She explained that growing in Texas presents its own unique and local challenges. “The only problem with gardening in Texas,” she said, “is that ‘average’ growing season is not...you never know what the average season is. Other parts of the country, it’s not that hard. Here, it’s not that easy to figure out.”

#### New gardeners and the community garden’s legacy

A couple gardeners mentioned how important they think it is for new gardeners—both those who are new to gardening (or at least new to gardening in spaces larger than small boxes or containers) and those who are newcomers to the region—to enjoy successes early on in the development of their practice. For this reason, they believe the opportunity for learning in the community garden attracts new members and has the potential to sustain individual gardeners’ practice and, by extension, maintain the community. One of the interviewees who expressed this belief, SU, spoke about how simple the process of learning how to garden can be, despite the popular misconception that gardeners must all have green thumbs. At the same time, he acknowledged that

“starting anything new” can be challenging for most people. He recognized how helpful it can be for a new gardener who is just starting out—or for gardeners who are trying to expand their skillset, for that matter—to have someone more experienced “show you the way.”

“Starting anything new, change is hard,” SU said, “as we’ve all learned in social theory. Which I’m sure you’ve probably taken. Freezing and unfreezing behaviors, windows of opportunity. So, it’s hard to change people.” He said that in another community of which he is a part, his work community at a state agency located near the garden, he has witnessed just how challenging it can be for people to make changes in their personal lives. He has been frustrated while working for the state, especially “working with people who are so entrenched in their ways in a bureaucracy” and finds that frustrating to observe (29:18-29:50). Similar to JS, then, SU believes that learning something new, gardening in this case, can be a way to make personal changes and has the potential to improve individuals’ lives.

Another gardener expressed the belief that the community garden can be a good place for new gardeners to learn about the practice because of the support system of experienced practitioners. Like SU, JM articulated his belief in the power of early successes as one way to encourage new gardeners to keep working their plots. He said that the “reward incentive” is especially crucial for people who are new to gardening because of the discouragement that happens when a gardener’s crops fail. For example, he mentioned his concerns about people—especially new gardeners—who visit Sunshine’s annual fundraiser, our Spring Plant Sale. He said that he fears they may not

have the knowledge—or even the notion to ask—about which varieties of the plants that we sell will work best for their home gardens. He said that many of the people he meets and speaks with at the Spring Plant Sale are relatively novice gardeners and that, especially when they have not gardened in the area, their lack of knowledge and access to appropriate resources can cause them to give up before they experience the joys of a successful garden. He stated that, “many gardening books—and seeds and plants, for that matter—are not based in this region, Central Texas. They’re often based in other places, such as Pennsylvania or Illinois, which have way different climates and growing seasons than here.” As a solution, he has considered setting up “an Experienced Gardener’s Table—like an ‘Ask the Gardener’ panel” at future Spring Plant Sales. On the flip side of the challenges new gardeners face, JM said that the pride and pleasure one enjoys from a successful harvest can be just as powerful a motivator to continue gardening as failure can be to quitting. “It’s kind of a magical experience when it happens,” he said.

In addition to helping gardeners in the greater Austin community learn from the resources available at Sunshine, JM believes that it is important to support new gardeners at Sunshine in order to secure its continued existence and preserve its legacy into the future. JM, who was the president of the garden at the time of the interview, expressed his hope to transfer knowledge to new gardeners at Sunshine as a means of sustaining the community. Regarding new members of the community, he said, “I think that the more we can do with new gardeners—that’s the future of this garden.” He spoke at length about what he perceives as a fundamental concern the maintenance of the community:

You look around, the bulk of the people here are getting up in years and, you know, if we have a constant turnover in the younger gardeners because they come and try for a year and it doesn't work, then we're not building that core group of people for the next generation to run this garden. I mean, it doesn't run itself, it doesn't take care of itself, you know. And so we need people to be engaged and involved. And the first step of that is for them to have a garden that works for them.

In other words, JM believes that the transfer of knowledge among community members constitutes a significant form of community preservation. More specifically, he believes that it is valuable to preserve the knowledge of older generations, transferring that knowledge directly from older, experienced gardeners to younger, newer gardeners.<sup>6</sup>

This rhetoric reflects a common theme among new agrarian authors, such as Wendell Berry, but JM's anxiety about losing the knowledge and experience of older generations is perhaps a bit misplaced in the community garden. For one thing, there are,

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<sup>6</sup> JM's comments here struck me as contradictory or ironic, given what he said about feeling like he has *not* learned as much from experienced gardeners in the community as he had hoped or anticipated. Also, his comments here seemed unexpected because he voiced what I interpreted as a mild complaint (or at least frustration) in regard to the "anecdotal" knowledge other gardeners shared (as compared to his record-keeping and "empirical" knowledge-building practices.) However, upon closer reflection, I think what JM said about his disappointment in the limited amount of new gardening knowledge he has acquired since joining the community was meant or at least can be interpreted as unique to his own skillset and needs as a growing practitioner. In other words, though he has not learned as much as he wanted from experienced gardeners, he still appreciates the value of the community as a resource for newcomers to gardening in general and in the region.

in fact, books and other forms of traditional print media about gardening in the region. But in addition to and beyond traditional media, there exists a wealth of shared knowledge in the digital sphere. Furthermore, given the very real concerns about the changing climate and the fluctuations of the seasons more generally speaking, what works for one gardener one year (or even several years) might not always be successful any other given year. If anything, it would seem that sharing practical “knowledge” about how to *adapt* to gardening in the region would be more valuable in the long term. I put “knowledge” in quotations here because one could argue that this does not necessarily reflect “knowledge” but rather a familiarity with the adaptability one must develop as a gardener. More important than “knowledge,” gardeners cultivate a comfort with the process of trying, sometimes failing, experimenting, sometimes succeeding, while problem-solving along the way. As IF put it, “It’s fun to experiment in the garden.” A gardener cannot *know* how a changing climate will affect the practice of gardening in the future. At the same time, there are techniques that older gardeners can and do share with younger, *inexperienced*, new gardeners that might make the likelihood and ease of their success happen more smoothly.

In other words, the notion that the garden is a space where “empirical” or practical knowledge about *practice* needs to be *preserved* appears to be a misplacement of what might be a more pressing concern: that is, the preservation of the *community*. One implication of what new agrarians and garden participants like JM are saying about transferring knowledge emerges: these folks appreciate the value of learning how to garden *from other humans*, as opposed to learning from the internet and books.

Knowledge *sharing*, as a practice, is a common value in the community and offers a different learning experience in the community garden than learning about gardening through media. Through sharing gardening experience with one another, gardeners engage in meaning-making processes that sustain the resilience of the community.

#### Practices of learning new things in the community garden

At least one interviewee spoke about the practice of gardening and the transformative benefits of learning something new and how the process of learning can affect personal change and growth. For example, JS said that for him, gardening “fits into this weird, liberal-Gospel of ‘self-improvement that [my wife] and I both have.’” He said they have both gradually changed (or to use his word, “improved”) their diets—which used to include meats, dairies, and the occasional fast-food—as a result of gardening. They are both now vegetarians. He emphasized the fact that their changes have been and continue to develop over the years. He said that for him, “the *practice* of self-improvement—whether it’s eating, gardening, making music, for example—is a process, one that is more successful when taken on gradually than radically. He explained, “I’m a letters person [...] Experiential learning, hands-on learning, learning to do things kinesthetically [...] is an opportunity to do things that I don’t give myself often enough.”

A few interviewees said they appreciate the opportunities the community provides for meeting and learning from people who are not from Austin or the Central Texas region. One interviewee, AK, talked about her appreciation of the “diversity” represented

at Sunshine.<sup>7</sup> AK, a native Texan, said she has befriended immigrants in the community who have brought their favorite edible plants and vegetables from their home countries to their garden plots at Sunshine. She said that she shares and swaps seeds and recipes with these gardeners, learning about growing and preparing food that she would not have otherwise. “One thing I like about this garden,” she said, “is people from different nationalities tend to grow different things. So, we trade back and forth.”

AK framed this type of learning—cultural exchange—using terms of reciprocal knowledge sharing (“we trade back and forth”). Her description is similar to how other participants described learning from “experienced gardeners” about how to grow in the Central Texas region (a “sharing” or “passing down” of information, resources, techniques, experiences). At the same time, AK’s comments demonstrate that she values the experience of learning things that are new to her from people who are relative newcomers—or, at least—non-native to the region themselves. She said that she has learned about a variety of produce and the techniques for planting, growing, and preparing those plants from several garden members, including “an Asian couple, a Hispanic couple” and her “friend K.,” who is Jamaican. Instead of articulating a value for the preservation of local knowledge from older, experienced gardeners, AK’s appreciation of learning in the community garden involves gaining experience with

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<sup>7</sup> Notably, a few interviewees said that they do not think of Sunshine as a very diverse community. Based on my observations and informal conversations with people in the garden, my own impression is that the garden is a more culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse community than I would have expected, especially given its location in a relatively affluent and predominantly white part of town.

gardening practices and produce from newcomers, not preserving old knowledge. “You don’t want a Trump garden,” AK said. “And it makes for diverse plots.”

Another gardener, SP, shared similar views about the range of, if not cultures, ideas represented in the garden community. When I asked SP if there is anything particularly attractive to her about gardening in a communal space, she described the “wonderful ability to ask and learn from other gardeners’ experiences” in the garden. She explained, “We have over 200 gardeners, and so we have over 200 ways of doing things.”<sup>8</sup> She said that “You can ask multiple people about their perspectives until you find something that fits ‘your style and your method.’” Like several other interviewees, including AK, JS, and SU, SP values the *process* of learning how to garden from others, perhaps more than the technical knowledge one can acquire as a member of the community. She said, “I know my garden has turned into a big hodgepodge of ideas.” She emphasized that these ideas have grown and changed since joining the community. According to SP, her garden plot represents ideas, “Not only that I learned growing up, but what I’ve learned from other gardeners just out at the community garden.”

## CONCLUSION

When the so-called “locavore” movement emerged approximately two decades ago, a popular bumper-sticker revitalized an older concept: “Think Global, Act Local.”

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, there are closer to 300 active members at Sunshine Community Gardens. There are, however, approximately 200 plots.



The catchphrase implores individuals to act within their communities while maintaining a sense of the broader connection their localized acts have with wider systems. Applying the concept of rhetorical “region” to the community garden illustrates this slogan and the values behind it. In Sunshine Community Gardens, members of the (hyper-)local community come into contact with concepts and practices from well beyond the region. Members encounter a variety of gardening practices and techniques, ranges of experience (both in terms of amount of time and locations spent gardening), different outcomes that gardeners hope to enjoy from their work in the garden, unique styles of learning, and multiple conceptions of what constitutes valuable “knowledge” in the community.

Given the challenges to successful gardening faced by novice and experienced growers alike, one might reasonably expect that growers speak about gardening practices differently, depending on their range of experience, their goals in growing, and their familiarity with the geographical demands of the place where they garden. Not surprisingly, many interviewees mentioned other regions where they have experienced growing food, often comparing those regions with gardening in Central Texas. Indeed, several participants credited their need and desire to learn from experienced gardeners about organic gardening in Central Texas as one of the primary factors motivating their participation in a community garden. As one of the oldest and largest community gardens in the United States, it is not surprising that Sunshine would attract hobbyists from a wide range of experiences and commitments to the practice of gardening. As a result, alongside the variety of produce and flowers cultivated at Sunshine, a veritable

“hodgepodge of ideas” about the purposes and values of learning and knowledge-sharing grows in this community garden.

Keeping this “hodgepodge of ideas” in mind and recalling Jenny Rice’s description of critical regional rhetorics discussed elsewhere in this study, we can identify another way that the community garden functions as a “fold,” a rhetorical space where adjacently-related things come into contact. According to Rice, critical regional rhetoric “disrupts given narratives of belonging that are framed on a national level and between individuals. Regional rhetorics provide alternative ways of framing our relationships and modes of belonging. Specifically, they give us new descriptions of relationships” (203). As the interview data presented in this chapter indicates, the community garden can be included among new descriptions of what constitutes a rhetorical “region,” as a *fold* where adjacent relationships come into contact.

Conceptualizing the community garden in this way—as an example of a regional fold—also demonstrates how nostalgia can be a productive, if not progressive, force that motivates actions in both the present and with an eye toward the future (which I discussed in the second chapter of this study). Likewise, critical regionalism, according to Rice, “rejects the traps of nostalgia and pastiche by challenging territorializations of all kinds. What is critical in critical regionalism is exactly what prevents it from bleeding into a kitschy or nostalgic regionalism: a disruption of narrative. Such disruption is where critical regionalism meets rhetoric” (203). This disruption of narrative, as illustrated by the range of learning styles, knowledge-sharing, and meaning-making processes

articulated by interviewees in this study, happens in the community garden, despite its potential ties and shared investments to nostalgic agrarian rhetorics.

## Conclusion: Pasts, Presents, Futures

When I started this project, I brought to it several suppositions. Some of my hunches were based in the personal—specifically, my own beliefs (however naïve or optimistic) about the merits of local food movements generally and the practice of growing produce for personal consumption in particular. For example, considering what I perceived to be a widespread local food movement—a cultural, social, and political phenomenon that has been growing in its scope and influence across the United States in noticeable ways for at least a decade—I assumed that members of an urban gardening project in a city as trendy (if not also progressive) as Austin, Texas would be well-aware of the local food movement and their role within it. In other words, I thought the gardeners would not only acknowledge the local food movement’s existence as a given, but that they would also consider their participation at Sunshine Community Gardens as representative of the movement, if not constitutive of it.

To a lesser extent, I expected that these gardeners would both identify the movement and identify *with* it as a politically-inflected social and cultural phenomenon. I assumed that gardeners would identify with the local food movement as a “cause,” however nebulous or sprawling, and that they would agree that they are part of it, at the very least. I did not think that they would necessarily claim movement participation is the *primary* impetus for their gardening at Sunshine, but I expected that local food movement participation would be a factor most participants in the study agreed motivate them to garden in the community. I figured they would say they like being in touch—literally and

metaphorically—with nature first and foremost, an assumption which reveals my own values and biases, namely an enjoyment of and concern for nature that fundamentally contributes to my desire to experience it and care for it by growing my own vegetables. In short, I anticipated that more of the people I interviewed at Sunshine would make more direct connections between their gardening and the local food movement—between the personal and the political, the individual and the collective—than they actually did.

Other speculations about what gardeners might tell me about what inspires and motivates them to garden developed from the scholarship I had read about agrarianism, local food movements, and community gardening projects. At the same time, I recognized that these suppositions (both scholars' and my own) were, in many ways, conjecture—reasonable and well-informed assumptions, to be fair, but speculative nonetheless. Acknowledging that many of the expectations and claims that some scholars have developed regarding what motivates people to participate in local food movements and/or grow their own food are often unsubstantiated with qualitative evidence (understandably, given that much of the literature I am referring to now comes from disciplines within the Humanities, where scholarship involving human subjects research is not the methodological norm), it became my imperative to design a study and develop a dissertation project that incorporated interviews from the people on the ground and in the field.

Put another way, I am aware of the values that motivate me to garden. Many of these values I share with some of the interviewees I spoke with for my research, such as personal memories and nostalgia, an appreciation for nature and concern for the

environment, and the desire to develop connections with people in my local community. And I know what academics say about local food movements and their adherents. They claim that participants are persuaded by problematic rhetorics because, for example, they are motivated by agrarian romanticism in many cases, or by ideological nostalgia for bygone eras in other cases, or by the overstated promise of and potential for social change through local food activism.

Some of these assumptions about why people decide to garden and source their food locally might very well be true for many gardeners and local food movement proponents, but I could not stop wondering: What do the participants in local food systems have to say about what they are doing and why they do it? Are community gardeners motivated by the things we think they are; are they moved by the same values, ideas, and rhetorics that persuade me?

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, LIMITATIONS, AND QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Given the prevalence of the yeoman farmer as a trope in American cultural history and its salience in contemporary local food movements, the initial curiosity that motivated this study concerned the extent to which (neo)agrarian rhetorics motivate individual gardeners to join community gardens. Closely related to that question, I wanted to find out whether or not individual members of community gardens identify with community gardening as an act of collective resistance and embodied

environmentalism, and to what extent they are persuaded by neoagrarian rhetorics (including urban agrarianism and ecoagrarianism) as a form of environmental action.

As it turns out, members of this particular community garden, or at least the twenty-two members I spoke with, do not associate their actions with neoagrarianism as readily as one might expect. And not only that: these gardeners do not associate their gardening at Sunshine as an act of collective resistance, at least not first and foremost.

Instead, they are primarily motivated to garden for personal reasons, especially because of their own nostalgia for childhood experiences in gardens and outdoors. Nevertheless, this finding—that personal nostalgia motivates these gardeners—is not wholly unrelated to claims about neoagrarian rhetorics: indeed, neoagrarians have been criticized for their romantic notions about farming as a way of life. However, because the gardeners do not claim that agrarian nostalgia inspires them to garden, their nostalgia takes a different shape. They are not as motivated by group identification as we might anticipate. As scholars, we are of course skeptical of disambiguation between personal memory and national or social memory; likewise for the “personal” and the “political.” And yet, it is significant from the lens of rhetorical scholarship, to find such pervasive ambivalence among a group of actors who seem to be acting as part of a popular contemporary social movement (albeit a lifestyle movement).

Further complicating the ambivalent relationship to group identification found in this study, members of the community are not only motivated by their personal nostalgia to act (that is, practice gardening) in the present, but also several of them acknowledged their motivation to sustain the community of practice through their participation in it. In

other words, they do not readily identify with broader movements, yet they admit feeling motivated to sustain this hyper-local community. Again, neoagrarian rhetorics are and are not relevant: legacy as a form of stewardship (both environmental and community stewardship) is a fundamental tenant of neoagrarian solidarity (Motter and Singer), but participants did not echo or associate their hopes for the future of the garden on these terms. In short, these participants were not citing Wendell Berry as Gospel; in fact, most of them didn't know who he was if and when I brought him up.

These findings are not generalizable, and perhaps they uncover more questions than answers. The study is limited in several ways: the framing of the community itself is more “hobbyist” than “activist” oriented; the field site’s location in a relatively affluent neighborhood; the fact that all the participants are white (though I spoke informally with several persons of color, none of whom were willing or available to sign consent forms and be formally interviewed); the participants skewed toward middle-age and older.

In future studies, it will be interesting to find what similarities and/or differences emerge in different locations. As mentioned in the first results chapter, many community gardening projects are oriented towards food access, environmental justice, and other more intentionally activist-oriented projects. Perhaps in such gardens, individual gardeners are less reticent to identify with collective movements pertaining to social and environmental concerns. Would they claim stronger identification with the progressive forms of neoagrarian mythos?

Another question for further research pertains to how ideas about gardening and neoagrarian rhetorics circulate online. How can we conceive of the garden, of the practice



of gardening, in digital spaces? What does it look like when people share their knowledge, describe their experiences, cultivate their communities in the regional “fold” of the digital sphere? What communities coalesce around a shared interest—personal, political—in gardening and local food systems *as a result of* their engagement with the digital, such as social media networks?

## PASTS

I learned to garden later than most of the people I spoke with at Sunshine, after I had graduated college. And yet, like so many of the people I spoke with in the community, I trace the roots of my love for gardening to my childhood. When I was growing up, I spent countless hours under the care of my Greek grandparents. They both immigrated to the United States—Papou in 1947 at the astoundingly tender age of 14; Yiayia in 1951, at the respectable, ripe-old-age of 19. They arrived in North Carolina<sup>9</sup> from the rural, rugged mountains of Greece where they had spent their own childhoods herding goats, subsistence farming, and—quite literally—dodging bullets. Growing virtually all of their food with their enormous families (Papou had nine siblings; Yiayia had eleven), my grandparents narrowly survived famine, illness, and two consecutive wars: first, they lived through the German occupation of their tiny villages during World

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<sup>9</sup> To this day, I cannot glean a satisfactory explanation from my 86-year-old grandfather as to *why Greensboro, North Carolina*. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the verb “to glean” as: 1.) Obtain (information) from various sources, often with difficulty; 1.1 Collect gradually; 2.) (historical) Gather (leftover grain) after a harvest.

War II; then, on heels of the Nazis, they managed to either escape or outlast the guerrilla warfare of the Greek Civil War.<sup>10</sup>

My grandparents always had a garden. I remember clinging to my yiayia's apron under stalks of fragrant tomato plants towering taller than me. I remember grape vines twining around what would have otherwise been a carport. I remember watching my papou hoe the red clay of our Piedmont soil in central North Carolina. I remember the responsibility of being sent out to pick ripe peppers for them to be stuffed with rice and spices for our family's lunch or dinner meal. As a teenager, I watered my mother's landscaped yard twice a day during the lazy and humid summer months. I counted the seconds spent showering each shrub, dreaming that it was a vegetable garden instead. But I did not know how to garden on my own, so I had little to say when my mom asked me how I planned to take care of a vegetable garden against the onslaught of deer from the woods surrounding our home out in the country.

When I went to college in Asheville, a small city nestled in the valley of lush mountains that bare uncanny resemblance to the mountains of my grandparents' humble roots, the local food movement was budding elsewhere but already blooming like the rhododendron up there. I joined a local co-op grocery in West Asheville and become quickly accustomed to casually eating local produce and family-farmed "happy meat." Farms, farmers, farming felt ubiquitous and ever-present as the mountains in Asheville,

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<sup>10</sup> In a 2018 edited collection, *Inventing Place: Writing Lone Star Rhetorics*, Ryan Skinnell argues that people who are "emplaced out of place eventually begin the process of inventing place" (144).

and I became fascinated at how and why it seemed to be happening there, yet not in my hometown “down the mountain.”

I graduated college and moved back down the mountain, where I made a friend whose family had a large backyard garden just outside of town. I learned how to grow vegetables there and in containers that we lined up along the sidewalks like soldiers at our apartment. When we left our native North Carolina and went to Kentucky, I grew several gardens of my own; one in the ground, in soil so old and atrocious I can hardly believe anything came up; another in containers, in a parking lot and on a rooftop. But my dreams of dirt and seeds and sprouts and fields found me following a farmer around town, first at the Douglass Loop Farmers’ Market, then into his fields, then into the restaurant that featured his face among portraits of farmers in the region, the farmers who supplied the restaurant with their Harvest.

Dreams of dirt and fields followed me to Austin, Texas. Though more recent than any of the memories I just described, I cannot remember the moment I realized Sunshine Gardens should be my field site. I knew I wanted to participate, as I had in Louisville, in the community I would study and write about. There are farms and ranches both in and around Austin, of course, but the bustling bigness of Texas’s capitol city made farms seem far off and inaccessible to me. I found a garden, instead. Still, the idea—the ideograph—of the farmer continued to captivate me. Did gardeners find the Sunshine community out of a desire to grow their own, like farmers do? Like their families did?

Nostalgia can be a place where things stop growing. It can and does mire people's ideas and actions in a (fictionalized) sense of the past. When nostalgia informs political ideologies, it has the potential to shift from inertia to destruction. At the same time, nostalgia can be productive. When nostalgia moves people from imagining the past to acting in the present with concern for the future, it produces. Not all production is politically progressive, of course, which begs the question: Can nostalgia contribute to progressive political action? Environmental conservation, for example, incorporates nostalgic desires for pristine, unchanged wildernesses into actions that preserve, protect, or enhance natural ecosystems' potential for survival. But arguments are made across the political spectrum in favor of "conservation" (natural, cultural, political, etc.) How does one confront and negotiate nostalgia's fundamental ambivalence, its paradox between preservation and progress?

I find it hopeful that the folks I spoke with at Sunshine Community Gardens are nostalgic about their own lives, their immediate families, their most intimate communities instead of, as may be assumed, about past times in American history. It is also hopeful that this group of gardeners are not ideologically nostalgic, and that their nostalgia is not based in or perpetuating a (regressive) group identity. Their nostalgia reflects a longing for "home" that is not destructive, but constructive. It generates and perpetuates their motivation to (re)create a hopeful sense of home, but elsewhere. The embodied manifestation of their nostalgia—the continuation of their gardening practices in their present time and place—instills hopefulness, for me anyway, because it suggests that their actions are rooted in a sense of nurturing. In essence, these gardeners move with

nostalgic (self-)love. There is a nostalgia that progresses, that grows toward possibilities and futures.

## **PRESENTS**

At Sunshine Community Gardens, some members' reflective nostalgia brings them into the space and, like a subterranean river, it sustains their everyday gardening practices. But, as I have tried to make clear, their motivation does not begin *and end* with nostalgia. Not surprisingly, gardeners at Sunshine have other, additional, and multiple motivations for gardening in their present lives.

The gardeners in this community continue to trudge or trot from the comfort of their own homes (or backyards, for that matter) out to the garden and work their plots day after day, season after season, year after year. Why? For many reasons you might expect: they enjoy being outdoors and connecting with the natural environment despite (perhaps for some, in spite of) the urban setting; they like knowing where their food comes from, precisely, directly, intimately; they have stressful jobs and enjoy the immediacy and the physicality of weeding, hauling, harvesting; they appreciate the social network, the community within the community garden; in short, gardeners at Sunshine are motivated to garden because they enjoy it as a fun hobby.

Contrary to what we might have expected, members of this community gardening project go to the garden not because they necessarily believe that what they are doing there will Save the World. They are *not* on a mission. In fact, they are surprisingly

skeptical that their actions in the garden have an impact on systemic political change or environmental restoration. This finding contradicts conventional assumptions about agrarian rhetorics' influence on individuals who currently participate within a subsection of contemporary local food movements (namely, community gardening) today. Granted, a few of the gardeners I spoke with did mention their familiarity and appreciation of popular agrarian authors and closely-related advocates for food sovereignty. Interestingly enough, though, even the interviewee who cited Michael Pollan (arguably the most famous of contemporary local food movement advocates) as an influence on his perspective regarding any manner of cultural movements toward "the local" had never heard of Wendell Berry, the virtual grandfather of neoagrarianism.

This is to say that, even when participants acknowledged the local food movement, environmental concerns, or agrarian ideologies, they were ambivalent about a number of key things: 1.) the extent of those rhetorics' influence on their participation in a community garden, and/or 2.) the extent of their own identification with/in those collectives, and/or 3.) the potential for systemic change as a result of their gardening activities. Today, in their present lives, they garden for their own enjoyment and for the maintenance and perpetuation of the community. In other words, gardeners at Sunshine think of political action as something "other" than what they are doing in the garden everyday.

## **FUTURES**

The nostalgia I describe above (and throughout this dissertation) has compelling connections with the place-based knowledge-sharing that Sunshine gardeners value, the community-building practices that were discussed in Chapter 3. As I have stated before, many of the people I spoke with learned how to garden while they were young people from family and closely acquainted members of their most immediate communities (neighbors, for example, or if they learned how to garden after their adolescence, often they were taught to garden by their spouses and partners). Now that they are adults (and many of them seniors), with decades of experience, they continue to garden in social settings. And, though a larger social network than the intimate social settings of their childhood gardens, the most active participants of the community continue to form close bonds with other gardeners. They share stories about their produce in years past, swap experiences with different varieties of plants. In group conversations that I have been privy to, long-time gardeners will also recount experiences and facets of the organization's (volunteer) administration: previous leaders, past projects, and descriptions of the place (as the garden's location, size, and shape has transformed over the five decades it has been in existence.)

Several gardeners framed their motivation to join Sunshine and garden in community setting as partially—if not also initially or primarily—driven by the pragmatic desire to learn the logistics of growing in the Central Texas region. And yet, there was an undercurrent of ambivalence in this instance as well. On the one hand, some gardeners were enthusiastic about what they have learned because of their engagement in

the community: they have acquired general and localized gardening techniques; they were introduced to previously unfamiliar (occasionally even foreign) plants, to Texas native plant varieties, and to common varieties that grow well in the region; they also met and learned about other Sunshine community members' diverse and far-flung backgrounds. On the other hand, some gardeners were skeptical about how much they have learned from other members of the community. Either way, these interviewees emphasized their belief that knowledge-sharing at Sunshine is valuable not necessarily because of the practical information that is exchanged between gardeners,<sup>11</sup> but because that social engagement is what ultimately sustains the community. In other words, the ways this community talks about sustaining it—through sharing knowledge and experience—exemplifies and reinscribes the ambivalent and reflective nostalgia that brings them to the community in the first place. It demonstrates, yet again, another way that both ambivalence and nostalgia do not always or necessarily preclude or inhibit collective action and participation in social movements such as the local food movement. Paradoxically, ambivalence (“deep ambivalence,” especially) and nostalgia (“reflective nostalgia,” specifically) can effectively motivate individuals to act with/in their communities.

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<sup>11</sup> With an important exception being members who are new to either gardening in general or gardening in Central Texas specifically.



## Appendices, Works Cited, and Vita

### APPENDIX A: TABLE OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

The following table characterizes the participants of the study and identifies the chapter in which their interviews appear in the dissertation.

Table 1.0: Participant Characterizations

HIDDEN TEXT: NOTE: If you have more than one appendix you can use the Heading 2,h2 style and label each appendix separately, e.g., Appendix A, Appendix B, etc. You could also title this section “Appendices” using the Heading 2, h2 style, and use Heading 3,h3 for each separate appendix

Pseudonym	Participant Characterization	Appearance in Chapter No.
WI	WI is a middle-aged white woman who had been a member of SCG for less than a year when interviewed. She was also a newcomer to Austin who had relocated from a similar city the Pacific Northwest. She had been gardening on and off for thirty years and is the mother of three young-adult children.	1
PH	PH is a middle-aged white man who had been gardening at SCG for less than a year when interviewed. A native Austinite, he did not garden as a child, but has been a lifelong outdoor recreation enthusiast.	1, 2
KP	KP is a young-adult white man who had been gardening at SCG for less than a year when interviewed. He did not garden as a child, but has been a lifelong outdoor recreation enthusiast. He relocated to Austin several years before the time of the interview from the East Coast. Along with his wife, KP had been gardening for 3-4 years before joining SCG.	1
RT	RT is a senior-aged white man who had been gardening at SCG since the 1993. He started gardening as a child and continued the practice as an adult with his family, including his wife (JA) and two (now adult) children. RT is originally from the East Coast.	1, 3

GR	GR is a senior-aged white woman who had been gardening at SCG on-and-off since the 1980s. She started her first garden during her senior year in college, circa 1973, but grew up watching her father grow tomatoes. Originally from the East Coast/Mid-Atlantic region, she has been a member of community gardens at locations across the United States since the seventies.	1, 2
JW	JW is a middle-aged white woman who had been gardening at SCG for 3-4 years at the time of the interview. She has been a lifelong gardener who learned from her grandparents, who were farmers. Originally from the Northeast, she and her partner (JM) also own and operate a small homestead farm in a neighboring county. She had been living in Austin for over a decade at the time of the interview.	1, 3
SP	SP is a young-adult white woman who had been gardening at SCG for an undisclosed amount of time (though at least several years) when interviewed. She is a lifelong gardener and native of Pasadena, Texas where she grew up watching her father cultivate large gardens on an acre of land.	1, 2, 3
BG	BG is a senior-aged white woman who had been gardening at SCG for approximately eight years at the time of the interview. She grew up in an agricultural area of California, watching her mother garden.	2
KS	KS is a young-adult white woman who had been gardening at SCG for about a year when interviewed. She started gardening as an adult, but remembers her father's "green thumb" from her childhood (he grew up on a farm). She is a native Texan.	2
PP	PP is a senior-aged white woman who had been gardening at SCG for an undisclosed amount of time. Originally from Long Island, she had been living in Austin for 35 years at the time of our interview. She remembers her mother gardening from her childhood. She is married to a native Texan and raised four sons in Austin.	2
MM	MM is a senior-aged white woman who had been gardening at SCG since the 1980s, consistently. She grew up in Indianapolis where she witnessed her grandparents gardening and her uncles farming. As an adult, she has lived in both Boston and Berkeley, and has	2

	maintained a garden for most of her adult life, except for during college.	
MP	MP is a senior-aged white woman who had been gardening at SCG since approximately 2002. She grew up in rural, post-War England, where her father was a small farmer. Having lived all over the world as an adult, including Saudi Arabia, she maintained a gardening practice in a variety of climates.	2
JM	JM is a middle-aged white man who had been gardening at SCG for 3-4 years at the time of the interview. He grew up in the Midwest where his grandparents maintained a large garden throughout his childhood. He and his partner (JW) joined the community garden to learn about growing food in Central Texas, where they also cultivate a homestead outside of Austin.	2, 3
KM	KM is a middle-aged white woman who had been gardening at SCG since 2003. She started gardening when she was in high school in Corpus Christi, and remembers her grandparents' gardening.	2
JS	JS is a middle-aged white man who joined SCG 3-4 years before the time of the interview. JS did not grow up gardening, but began gardening with his wife several years before he relocated to Austin from Wilmington, NC. He is originally from a Midwestern city. It should be noted that JS is a personal friend of the author.	3
IF	IF is a senior-aged white woman who had been gardening at SCG since the early 1990s. Her mother was a gardener and IF, a Master Gardener, has gardened most of her adult life. She is originally from the Northeast.	3
SU	SU is a middle-aged white man who had been gardening at SCG for at least a decade. He has family roots in the Midwest and grew up in his great-great aunt's garden.	3
AK	AK is a middle-aged white woman who had been gardening at SCG for an undisclosed amount of time. Originally from Texas, AK spent time in the garden with her teenaged son. She planned to continue gardening in a community garden setting upon upcoming relocation to San Antonio.	3
JA	JA is a senior-aged white woman who had been gardening at SCG since the early 1990s. Her husband (RT) catalyzed her gardening. She also gardened with her two children during their youth.	N/A

GC	GC is a middle-aged white woman who had been gardening at SCG for 6-7 years prior to the interview. She grew up gardening as a child, and picked it back up post-college. She is not originally from Austin, but did not disclose where she grew up.	N/A
JF	JF is a senior-aged white man who had been gardening at SCG since the early 1990s. He is married to IF, and like her, he is originally from the Northeast.	N/A
SP2	SP2 is a middle-aged white woman who had been gardening at SCG for ten years at the time of the interview. She is a lifelong gardener who learned from her grandparents. She is a native of Port Arthur, Texas and mother of at least one adult son.	N/A

## **APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE**

The following list of questions were used to guide the semi-structured interviews for the study:

- How did you decide to join the community garden?
- What's appealing to you about the practice of community gardening?
- How long have you been at Sunshine and what has kept you coming back to the garden?
- Who do you garden or associate with at the garden?
- Are there different groups of people who garden here?
- What do you think motivates other garden members to grow their own food in a communal setting?
- I've heard some people say that they think of community gardens as farming. Have you ever thought of it that way? What would you say the similarities and differences are?
- What do you think of when you think of farmers? And community gardeners?

As conversations with participants progressed organically, other questions were asked or some of these questions were posed differently. I have made a note of variations in interview questions in the text when applicable.

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## VITA

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Dr. Harrison earned a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing from the University of North Carolina at Asheville in 2009, and a Master of Arts in English Rhetoric and Composition from the University of Louisville in 2013 before starting her doctoral study in Rhetoric and Writing at the University of Texas at Austin that year.

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This dissertation was typed by the author.